

GESTURING TOWARD THE GLOBAL: LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE AT
THE TURN OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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This dissertation theorizes the place of Latin American fiction from the 1990s and the 2000s within a global framework by studying ways in which authors reflect upon the experience of globalization and situate themselves beyond the boundaries of national literatures. In particular, it analyzes a set of disruptive practices that lay in-between spaces among the verbal, the performative, and the visual. By gesturing toward the global, these phenomena seek to estrange and re-mediate power relations both within literary canons and across worldwide cultural hegemonies. Through them, authors not only address globalization as a literary topic, but claim an active role in imagining the global. The interest of this study is thus twofold, for while such a gesturing distinguishes contemporary authors who otherwise do not claim to form a generational “movement” or “aesthetic,” it also invites a reconfiguration of received ideas about global culture.

Among such phenomena, I study appropriations of the concerns and methods of contemporary art, parody of celebrity culture, and representations of alternative models of globalization. The first of four chapters shows how César Aira’s motif of the “sonrisa seria” calls for readers to critically explore the relationship between iconic images, what these represent beyond the realm of the national, and their function within visual displays of power. The second chapter analyzes Aira and Mario Bellatin’s borrowings from conceptualism and performance art as they bear upon the

problems of the circulation of books and the commodification of the presence of the author in a world market. The third chapter presents how, by imagining Medellín as the capital of the world, Fernando Vallejo carries out a transcendental exploration of the limits of the visual as an instrument for mediation between local, national, and global realms. Lastly, the fourth chapter considers the reasons behind the persistent choice of Nazism, as it is represented in pop culture, as a distressing backdrop for contemporary reflections on globalized politics in Roberto Bolaño, Jorge Volpi and Ignacio Padilla.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Héctor Hoyos was born in Bogotá, Colombia in 1978. After graduating from Colegio San Carlos, he double-majored Magna Cum Laude in Philosophy and Literature at the University of the Andes. Los Andes published both his honors theses, which deal, respectively, with the philosophy of language of the late Wittgenstein and with urban literature from Bogotá. During his undergraduate studies, he did a semester abroad at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He came to Cornell for his doctorate in 2003. This fall he will join the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Stanford University as an Assistant Professor.

A mis sobrinos.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is about the inscription of contemporary Latin American fiction in the global. The following pages study strategies, motifs, and literary experiments that allow authors to reflect upon the experience of globalization and to situate themselves beyond the boundaries of national literatures.

Let us begin with a telling anecdote. Delivering a lecture on the work of Sergio Pitol (Puebla 1933), Jorge Volpi (México 1968) declared provocatively that Latin American literature does not exist. The year was 2006 and the place was, mind you, the Mexican embassy in Peking (*El universal*). The author was not impersonating some latter-day Marco Polo who reported about a faraway homeland. Given the worldwide standing of Gabriel García Márquez (Aracataca 1928) and his modern classic *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), the audience, composed of diplomats, Chinese students of Spanish, and passers-by, was well aware of the existence of Latin American literature and would recognize by proper name at the very least a writer and a novel from that tradition. Indeed, as would be common knowledge given the setting, the prestigious *Zhonghua Dushu Bao* ("China Book Reading Weekly") had named García Márquez's novel as one of the most influential works of fiction in the country during the 20th century (Deming). Volpi's statement then, at first sight perplexing if not outright self-cancellating, sought to bring the concept of "Latin American literature" to the forefront, questioning its validity as a category to describe contemporary phenomena. It went unsaid that, whereas the category could befit an author like García Márquez, whose works had possibly lured some in attendance into studying Spanish in the first place, it would somehow fail to describe the works of Pitól and Volpi.

What had changed? Volpi's gesture gains relevance when considered against the background of the overall situation of Latin American literature at the turn of the 21st century, which is one marked by deep contradictions. On the one hand, globalization, henceforth understood as an intensification of economic and cultural interdependence coupled with subordination to the rules of a common world market, led Latin American literature to reach more readers throughout the globe –as Volpi's mere presence in China suggests. On the other, the only authors to attain a long-lasting global stature were Borges (Buenos Aires 1899), Neruda (Parral 1904) and those of the literary Boom. Borges, however, was less associated with "Latinamericanness" than his counterparts, as his emblematic works, more concerned with metaphysics than with local color, have been assimilated as "universal" (Livon-Grossman). In other words, save for the enduring poetry of Neruda, Latin American literature has never enjoyed the international protagonism it had during the years of the literary Boom, the period in the sixties and early seventies when fiction by Cortázar (Argentina, Brussels 1914-Paris 1984), Fuentes (Mexican, Panama City 1928), Vargas Llosa (Arequipa 1936), and García Márquez occupied the main stage. One may best characterize the present juncture in negative terms and in comparison to that inescapable reference point, the last moment in which Latin American literature can be said to have summoned global attention.

As a region, Latin America is today less prominent or geopolitically "strategic" than it was during the heyday of the tension between Western capitalism and Soviet communism, which roughly coincided with the Boom and determined its international success (Larsen 1995). If under Cold War dualism national literatures had a fixed place within a broader scheme of things, Volpi speaks at a time when conceptual apparatuses adjust to situate Latin American literature in a newly "globalized world" where displacement seems to be the rule. Accordingly, the author subverts an occasion

where, as the home-grown writer in a foreign consular office, he was expected to speak as a national cultural representative. On the opposite end of the spectrum of such a skeptical view of the assumed correspondence between literatures, places, and politics, consider the paradigm of times past, when a world-famous and stadium-filling poet like Neruda could claim at home or abroad to speak for all Latin Americans dead and living, as in the well-known verses of his “Alturas de Macchu Picchu [Heights of Macchu Picchu]” (1950): “Yo vengo a hablar por vuestra boca muerta (...) Hablad por mis palabras y mi sangre [I come to speak through your dead mouth (...) Speak for my words and my blood]”.¹ Volpi speaks from a cultural horizon where places, like the Inca site, are often reduced to touristic imagery.

There is no univocal account of the mixed effects of globalization on contemporary Latin American literature. By encouraging the free-flow of information through the use of new technologies, it makes it easier for authors and readers to interact –and perhaps also to abandon traditional literary forms, as the rapid growth of the literary blogosphere suggests. However, the simultaneity brought about by new technologies ultimately underscores the “lack of coevalness,” to borrow Johannes Fabian’s term, that exists between metropolitan centers and their non-metropolitan counterparts. It takes considerably more time for an emerging author from Latin America to make it to the international limelight than it does for a writer from the First World to do so. Whereas for the latter a first novel may suffice, for the former it is usually after an already distinguished career at a local level that international recognition may come. If uneven economies of prestige are thus an important factor to consider, the consequences of globalization for the publishing industry are not to be overlooked.²

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations will be my own.

² For a contrast between the international visibility of emerging writers from the First World and their counterparts in Latin America, compare young authors like Jonathan Safran Foer (Washington, 1977)

As Daniel Link has shown, during the nineties there was a re-nationalization of Latin American literature that obeyed the interests of publishing houses recently placed under the control of international media conglomerates. The new owners implemented “niche marketing,” understood as the systematic breaking down of the market in order to cater to increasingly specialized patterns of consumption. In other words, they narrowed down the cultural mission of publishing so as to increase productivity, favoring “products” of rapid consumption in local markets over riskier, mid-term “investments,” thus leading bookstores to hold in their catalogues either parochial new authors or “classics,” such as the novels written by Boom authors, but little in between.³ The result of these policies is that there is little contact between, say, Perú and México, except when sanctioned by Spanish editorial houses. Prominent local works published between the Boom and the present stage of globalization did not travel among Latin American nations, even after dictatorships fell in the Southern Cone –for instance, but for a few specialists, Juan José Saer (Serodino 1937) has not been read in Colombia, or Antonio Caballero (Bogotá 1945) in Argentina– which reinforces the perception that literary works that may serve as cultural common denominators come from decades past.

Consequently, while Volpi’s Peking lecture follows a rhetoric of unboundedness from place and aspires to participation in global culture unmediated by the category of “Latin American literature” and the expectations related to it, at the same time it laments how, due to the reduced literary exchange among Latin American countries, “Latin American literature” has become a hollow category. It is unclear then whether

with Latin American writers from their generation. I derive the term “economy of prestige” from James English, who follows Bourdieu in studying prizes, literary or otherwise, as distinctive cultural phenomena of contemporary times. English does not delve into the problematic of how authors, depending on their sites of enunciation, assume different roles in uneven transactions of prestige.

³ For an account of how similar policies had transformed U.S. publishing in the previous decade, see Schifffrin.

such discourse is calling to suppress the category, to reinvent and to reinvigorate it, or otherwise just shaking things up. The author elaborates his views unironically in the *Revista de la Universidad de México*, where, in the context of proposing Roberto Bolaño (Santiago 1953 - Blanes 2003) as “the last Latin American writer” he argues that the only other remnants of Latin American literature are the three surviving Boom writers, the memory of magical realism, “y miles de académicos que aún creen que es posible encontrar vínculos entre los demás escritores latinoamericanos [and thousands of academics who think it is still possible to find links among the rest of Latin American writers]” (92).

In fact, there may very well be “thousands of academics” who *do not* take “Latin American literature” for granted: in an article on the relationship between globalization and literary history, Jean Franco reports that within Latin American literary studies there is a tendency to re-think the current “post-national moment” through “a questioning of the very term ‘Latin American’ as a self-explanatory framework” (2006: 441). Similarly, Walter D. Mignolo has proposed a constructivist critique of the concept “Latin America” itself, in order to question the discrepancies between the term, on the one hand, and the territory or cultural entity it is supposed to allude to on the other (2005: xi).⁴ To some extent such discussions are part of an old problematic that is being played out anew and that, in its most extreme forms, echoes a philosophical dispute between nominalists and realists. Less radical conceptualizations are also reminiscent of past debates, for there has been long-standing tension about whether even the most established figures of the Latin American tradition should “belong” to individual nations or to broader realms, as homogeneity and heterogeneity

⁴ See also *Literary Cultures of Latin America: A Comparative History*, a three-volume compilation of articles by distinguished scholars who part from the premise that, in light of the heterogeneity of the object of study, “Latin American literary cultures” is a better explanatory frame than “Latin American literature” (Kadir and Valdés Eds.).

in Latin America are, as everywhere else, in constant struggle. Whereas essentializing or relativizing Latin America and its literature is thus a recurrent opposition brought up by academics and by writers alike, what distinguishes the contemporary debate is a sense of urgency in the face of strong market forces.

In order to cater to a global market, editorial houses have used “Latinamerican-ness” as a sales pitch, assimilating it to magical realism and to parochialism (Herrero Olaizola, Molloy). Apart from co-opting identitarian discourse for the sake of commercialism, in many contexts this essentialist turn effectively flattens the heterogeneity behind the adjective “Latin American” and turns it into a sort of brand name. Such rampant commodification has prompted creative responses from writers, including a noteworthy precedent to the Peking lecture, the 1996 “Manifiesto Crack” subscribed by Volpi, Pedro Ángel Palou, Eloy Urroz, Ignacio Padilla, Vicente Herrasti, and Ricardo Chávez Castañeda.⁵ The manifesto itself has been analyzed elsewhere (Palaversich 2005, Pohl). For our present purposes, it is interesting to consider the gist of its argument as an initial point in a trajectory that leads to Volpi’s statement about the “non-existence” of Latin American literature. In that document, the authors reacted to the commodification of Latin American literature by rejecting the idea of being read *qua* Latin Americans instead of being read simply as writers. Since this toned down version of Volpi’s later provocation entailed, of course, breaking with the Boom, it would appear then that the path to a non-commercialized global literature passes through letting go of the burden of local literary history.

But does it? A paradox results from the coexistence of the discourse of rupture from the Boom and the rejection of Latin American particularism: who, apart from Latin American authors embedded in that tradition, would mind so much breaking

⁵ The founding essayistic texts of the group, as well as a bibliography of its works of fiction, have been compiled in Chávez Castañeda et al.

with the Boom in the first place? The Boom generation privileged a narrative of *transcending* the local in order to attain international readership and canonization, while contemporary authors often write under the dominant trope of *immanence*, understood as the recognition that the local and the global are commensurable. However, in practical terms there is no way, at least not yet, of situating oneself, so to speak, in an imaginary, unlabeled world-library where regional categorization would be to no avail. Insistent rejection of the Boom amounts thus to negative particularism. One may unequivocally find there a will to return to tradition: by defining themselves as other-than-the-Boom or other-than-magical realism, Crack authors hoped to distinguish themselves as their worthy, younger antagonists. The fairness of such discourse is matter of debate, particularly in regards to how, given its mediatic success, it casts a shadow over other contemporary writers, as well as over many more that came between them and the Boom.⁶ Crack authors are not exactly champions of resisting commercialism either, for their particular strand of anti-Latinamericanness, which to this day serves as their introductory credentials in China or elsewhere, has also been accused of being market-driven.

The preceding comments elucidate the overdetermined nature of Volpi's statement in Peking and introduce some of the overarching themes of this dissertation. We will examine the underlying affinity among the strategies for global recognition present in objects as diverse as the manifesto, the lecture, or actual works of fiction, devoting most of our attention to the latter. In the case of the Crack there is an obvious continuity among such elements, given how, as we will discuss with more detail in chapter four, its novels gather momentum from openly disavowing "Latinamerican-ness." Indeed, because the Crack has programmatically set itself on a course for global

⁶ For a somewhat skeptical rendition of the role of the Crack within the Mexican literary market and milieu, see Poniatowska.

recognition, one may readily appreciate how essays, narrative, and performance are internally connected, but this is not always as apparent when one considers other writers. Nonetheless, the movement illustrates a tendency in contemporary Latin American literature, which is that of gesturing toward the global.

The main purpose of this dissertation is to elucidate this tendency by characterizing its constitutive elements, which are a set of disruptive practices that seek to estrange and re-mediate power relations both within literary canons and across worldwide cultural hegemonies. These phenomena, which lay in-between spaces among the verbal, the performative, and the visual, allow authors not only to address globalization as a literary topic, but to claim an active role in imagining the global. The interest of this study is thus twofold, for while such a gesturing distinguishes a broader set of contemporary authors who otherwise do not claim to form a generational “movement” or “aesthetic,” it also invites a reconfiguration of received ideas about global culture.

For the sake of conceptual clarification, consider that whereas globalization is something we perceive, the global, understood as a growing consciousness of the world as a whole, is not. Globalization can be witnessed, say, by studying migration patterns or communication flows, but the global is primordially an exercise of political imagination.⁷ How to visualize an all-encompassing community? How to narrate the transactions that take place within it? How is the global to emerge from or otherwise stand against the economic aspects of globalization? Literature’s answers to such questions offer pertinent insights for speculative conceptualization; conversely, current critical debates shed light onto the particularities of the phenomena considered here.

⁷ For an account of how imagination also plays a part in conceptualizing globalization, see García Canclini. Studies related to globalization constitute one of the faster growing areas of inquiry in the humanities. Among the extensive recent bibliography, one may find particularly insightful discussions of the concepts of globalization and the global, as they pertain to literary criticism, in Jameson and Miyoshi Eds., Saussy Ed., and Featherstone.

One can thus articulate these two discourses around junctures that, like Volpi's lecture, reveal the tensions and contradictions at play in a given moment.⁸ Moreover, historicizing those singular objects can allow one to address the problem of the inscription of Latin American literature in the global in its own terms.

One could have a more systematic approach and draw a formal theory about the place of Latin American literature in the world from claims such as Volpi's, as one could evaluate whether such a theory is consistent or verifiable. In following such a path, one might explain phenomena in terms of contemporary critical concepts such as cosmopolitanism, postnationalism, world literature (*Weltliteratur*) or the "World Republic of Letters." Succinctly put, under such frames Volpi's comments would appear, respectively, as boldly cosmopolitan, postnationalistic, a realization of the Goethian promise of a literary practice that transcends the local and the national in order to treat universal human themes, or as living proofs of how, as Pascale Casanova would have it, there is a worldwide literary Order that cuts across local cultures and the different political systems in place in Mexico and China—a finding that might prove problematic to Casanova's assumptions about the seemingly indispensable centrality of Paris for the workings of the Republic.

In any of these sociologizing, top-down approximations, one gains perspective on the ensemble but loses sight of the detail. It is assumed that the sacrifice of detail is unavoidable when one is dealing with totalities, an idea that Franco Moretti espouses with his concept of "distant reading," according to which critics should be more mindful of the *longue durée* than of works themselves, since tendencies may span decades or centuries. But what if the totality is imagined at the level of the particular

⁸ Édouard Glissant proposes a similarly flexible method to conceive the "sea of contradictions" of the global (23). Informed by the Deleuzian notion of rhizome, Glissant uses cognitive metaphors such as "navigation" or "trajectories" in order to describe the multiple, complex, overdetermined set of relations in a *Tout-Monde*, a space where everything is immanent yet its elements are not identical, where the local and the global coexist without amalgamation, ecumenism, or complacency with reductionist, economic free-market globalization.

work, and at the level of even more particular but relevant gestures? Indeed, as Sebastiaan Faber puts it, “no hay texto particular que no nos pueda conducir hacia un espacio teórico que, a falta de mejor término, podría llamarse universal [there is no particular text that can not take us to a theoretical space that, for lack of a better term, one could call ‘universal’]” (139). Approaching phenomena such as Volpi’s declarations by going from the abstract (theories about literature and globalization) to the particular (instances thereof) would fall short of appreciating their belonging to a specific time and place, and might even replicate, as Jean Franco has observed in a similar context, the tendency to see Latin American art and culture as mere case-studies for metropolitan theories (2006: 184).

We will in fact continue to engage various theories of globalization and literature, but we would like to propose an approach that supplements them. What makes gestures such as Volpi’s so interesting is not what they *say* but what they *do*, the effects they generate –in this case, on both sides of the Pacific, if arguably the impact of the declaration was strongest when it came back home to Mexico transformed as news. There are crucial heuristic elements that would be lost to rigid theorization; the task is less to find an explanatory frame for them than to appreciate, in their specificity, the moments when an action or literary motif exceeds the explanatory frame at hand. In terms of the example, one does well in accounting for the perplexity of having an author come all the way to China, stand up and claim that he practices a non-existing art. It is upon being interpellated by such moments that one may begin not only to question the concept of “*Latin American literature*,” but, since this concept is relational and signifies through differentiation (by indicating that something *is not* Asian, African, or European literature), to imagine the global differently.

The present use of the verb “to gesture” derives primarily from reinterpreting, as a figure of thought and as a way of reading, a notorious element in the narrative of a

contemporary Latin American author who is seemingly worlds away from the Crack: César Aira (Coronel Pringles, 1949). As we will see in the first chapter, the gestural occupies a privileged place in Aira's writing, be it through the frequent invocation of a mysterious "serious smile" that ciphers authorial intention, or through the structural role played by various descriptions of the characters' facial expressions in the denouement of the plot. In Aira, interruption in the flow of thought and advancement of the story are one and the same thing, as his books revolve around moments of puzzlement that signify in an open-ended way, analogous to how an unexpected movement of the body could underpin, accompany, or question a verbal discourse. Through this playful technique, Aira offers insightful cultural and ideological critique, confronting readerly expectations about many subjects, including that of the place of Latin American literature in the world. Beyond their narrative function, this dissertation attempts to appropriate for criticism one of the most noteworthy traits of Aira's gestures, namely that of drawing from the force of perplexity to bear upon the understanding of the present.

"To gesture" conveys many relevant aspects of the phenomena, for gestures proper are ephemeral, deictic, and singular, yet combine with other elements to produce meaning. Likewise, as mentioned above, they may stand at the crossroads of the performative, the visual, and the verbal, but they are also to be found in any of these realms alone. Most importantly, "to gesture" brings about relations in an instant, which is something that allows it to redraw conventional "conceptual maps," or, for our purposes, to expose and challenge undertheorized assumptions about the place of Latin American literature in the global and, consequently, about the global itself. Whereas it is generally accepted that in the contemporary globalized world there is an intensified cultural interdependence across borders, such multifocal relations are still predominantly conceived along established axes and with a tendency to privilege

cultural exchange that emanates from metropolitan centers to the periphery. The chosen corpus often navigates against such currents, invigorating less frequent cultural exchanges (as between Mexico and China) or claiming centrality in unexpected ways.

We are talking of fleeting moments, to be sure. Gestures happen within language, but, more so than words, they offer a remainder of meaning, as it were they momentarily reach beyond the realm of signs to be absorbed back again by language – otherwise they are but mere corporeal movements.⁹ This semantical loop has been used elsewhere as an analogy to describe cultural dynamics, notably in a comic strip advertising the magazine *Internationale Situationniste* 11: “Il n’est pas de geste si radicale que l’idéologie n’essai de récupérer [There is no gesture so radical that ideology does not attempt to recuperate it]” (qtd. in Plant 188). Could one not see this very movement in the way commercialism and determinism caught up with the Crack’s discourse of rupture? This alone would not be a reason to dismiss it, though, for its trajectory is revealing.¹⁰

Other gesturing toward the global will follow a similar pattern. Exploring it as such will offer elucidation about the contradictory conditions of production of contemporary Latin American literature. We will not seek to explain away these contradictions, as they are part of an ongoing process of constitution of the global. Instead, we will focus on how specific gestures illuminate the tensions between the

⁹ For a narratological analysis of the role of gesture in storytelling, see Cassell and McNeill.

¹⁰ According to Baudrillard, contemporary art from the sixties –a relevant source for contemporary Latin American literature, as we will see in Chapter 3– was meaningful in a similar way: “Modern art wishes to be negative, critical, innovative and a perpetual surpassing, as well as immediately (or almost) assimilated, accepted, integrated, consumed. One must surrender to the evidence: art no longer contests anything, if it ever did. Revolt is isolated, the malediction “consumed.” All the more reason there would seem to be, then, to abandon all nostalgia, resign negativity, and admit finally that it is in the very movement of its authenticity, in systematizing itself according to a formal constraint, in constituting itself according to a play of successive differences, that the work of art offers itself of its own initiative as immediately integrable in a global system that conjugates it like any other object or groups of objects” (1972: 125).

coexisting poles of nationalism and post-nationalism, cosmopolitanism and parochialism, commodification and resistance to commodification.¹¹

Agamben observes that gesture operates as “the exhibition of mediality,” “the process of making a means visible as such” (2000: 58). Indeed, making means visible is in itself a critical task, all the more so when speaking about globalization and literature in abstract terms tends to be the norm, yet accounting for specific events is a different story. In this sense, historicizing meaningful gestures offers a methodological middle ground between generalization and particularism, even when the stakes are as broad as globalization. More importantly, this approach does not reduce something that is about art in the first place to mere information. “Strategies” for global notoriety are internal to the concerns that authors and their readerships stage in literary works – whether they are more or less “conscious” being irrelevant in this context. In present times, questions on the affinities and dissonances between the local and the global are part of the very conditions of possibility of creation, literary and otherwise.

The chapters of this dissertation will be as follows.

The first of four chapters examines the motif of the “sonrisa seria” in *El congreso de literatura* (1999) and *El juego de los mundos* (2000) in order to characterize César Aira’s poetics of gesture. Whereas peripheral locations tend to fall on the consumer and not on the producer side of celebrity culture, the author will use celebrity as a springboard to confront the literary canon (assimilating Carlos Fuentes to a “star”) and to explore the power of images at a global level. An iconoclast, Aira calls for readers to rethink their relation to authorial figures, as well as to question a larger set of issues related to visibility, such as the structures that allow for an iconic image to represent

¹¹ For a study that defends the thesis that we are facing the beginning of a postnational era in literary creation and criticism, see Castany Prado 2007. Among the authors studied here, the author mentions Vallejo, particularly his novel *El desbarrancadero* (2000), as exemplary of a “nihilist post-nationalism” (260). Castany’s corpus includes works published long before the nineties, as well as hypercanonical authors like Murakami, Rushdie, Naipaul, and Pamuk.

an entire nation and/or a cluster of political positions. By examining significant instances of Aira's idiosyncratic iconoclasm, I will further the case for conceiving gesture as a critical practice that invites us to cast new eyes over the place of Latin America in world literature and over the relation of contemporary readers to the Latin American tradition, broadly understood.

The second chapter studies how Aira and Mexican/Peruvian writer Mario Bellatin (México 1960) actualize the international legacy of conceptual and performance art by positing their narrative works as continuations of the artistic projects of Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys. As we shall see, this appropriation allows them to reflect on the problem of the circulation of books and the commodification of the presence of the author in a globalized economy. I examine Aira's "Duchamp en México" (1996) in relation to readymades by Duchamp, as well as Bellatin's aphoristic novel *Lecciones para una liebre muerta* (2005), in relation to the almost homonymous 1965 performance by Beuys. In both cases, allusions to landmark works of international contemporary art serve the purpose of destabilizing the rituals involved in the promotion of literature, while denouncing them as part of a more encompassing trend towards consumerism and exoticism. We will also consider Bellatin's *Escritores duplicados/Doubles d'écrivains* (2003) in order to reflect on the means by which Bellatin strives to bridge the separations between art, literature, and life; this in turn will lead to theoretical conjectures about the ways in which these forms of experimentalism speak to the times.

The third chapter zeroes in on *La virgen de los sicarios* (1994), a novel by Fernando Vallejo (Medellín 1942) that turns the tables on the war on drugs by depicting Medellín as the capital of the world. We will characterize the protagonist's lengthy diatribe against humanity as a meaningful site to think through the present configuration of global culture. By positing visual culture as religion, Vallejo carries

out a transcendental exploration of the limits of the visual as an instrument for mediation between local, national, and global realms. Examining how the novel ultimately portrays the experience of global media as instilled with undertheorized religious eschatological beliefs will allow us to set forth hypotheses about a global political theology.

Finally, the fourth chapter studies the persistent choice of Nazism, as it is represented in pop culture, as a distressing backdrop for contemporary reflections on globalized politics in Bolaño's *Literatura nazi en América* (1996), Jorge Volpi's *En busca de Klingsor* (1999), and Ignacio Padilla's *Amphitryon* (2000). Although the latter works are derivative of Bolaño's, when considered as a constellation they construct a distorted view of globalization –or in Bolaño's peculiar terms, “una imagen bizarra”– that elicits ideology critique through de-contextualization. By claiming the centrality of Nazism in global imagination, these narratives inscribe Latin American literature within contemporary discussions on the legacy of the Second World War, raising provocative questions about the proprietorship of local historical memory in globalized times.

CHAPTER 1

A GRIN WITHOUT A CAT: A POETICS OF GESTURE IN CÉSAR AIRA

Le style est l'homme même.

Georges-Louis Leclerc, upon accepting a
seat at the *Académie Française*.
Discours sur le style

In *El congreso de literatura* (1999), a mad scientist who wants to put together an “invincible army of intellectuals” sends a wasp to sting Carlos Fuentes and gather the cell he needs to clone him. The experiment fails as the cloning breeds silk worms: the wasp has stung the writer’s tie, “[a] splendid tie of natural Italian silk, over an immaculate white shirt... and a light gray suit (...) How could that poor, disposable clonic instrument know where the man ended and where his clothing began? For her it was all the same, it was all «Carlos Fuentes»” (111). As lighthearted and humorous as the episode is, it opens up many interpretative possibilities. For decades, Fuentes has been the postcard image of Mexican literature –the tie is indeed no appendix to his aura of refinement– and a major figure of Boom literature. The madman goes on to say that the critics and professors who attended the international literary conference where the wasp stung the tie found it just as hard to tell where the man began and where his books ended: for them it was all Carlos Fuentes too.

Is one to understand this episode as a parable of the changes in contemporary Latin American literature? Is this but another example of the recurrent theme of denouncing the death of Boom aesthetics while announcing a new project in its wake? This chapter reads this and other Airan gestures as part of a poetics that reflects on the ways in which politics are globalized through the power of the image. In Aira, the reverence summoned by the figure of Fuentes or of some other Author with capital A is

countered by a peculiar form of iconoclasm that not only calls for readers to rethink their relation to authorial figures but also to question a larger set of issues in the visual structure of power, understood as something that allows for an iconic image to represent an entire nation and/or a cluster of political positions. Examining significant instances of Airan iconoclasm will illustrate the use of gesture as a critical practice that invites us to cast new eyes over the place of Latin America in world literature and over the relation of contemporary readers to the Latin American tradition, broadly understood.

The Faces of Power

Ill-stung Fuentes is an instance of the ongoing exploration of “facial regimes” that takes place in Aira’s oeuvre. By “facial regime” I mean a mode that legitimizes power or determines the circulation of symbolic capital in relation to what Deleuze and Guattari have called faciality [visagéité], as in the statement “the face is a politics” (181). For them, faces are a determining normative element, both in the sense of being the expression of a normativity and a means for subject formation; their key example is how the face of a white-European Jesus inscribes itself into Western history and sets all sorts of standards, be it in iconography proper, in ideals of beauty or in the very measurement of time, as the face not only coincides with Year Zero but reinforces the corresponding concept of history from a prominent position all the way from the walls of churches to the bedroom.

As readers, we too invest the image of the writer with values and aspirations that come back to us with the force of the normative, of the collective. We empower the face, ask that it command us. There is no final agreement on how to define the Latin American Boom except for the general notion that it took place between the 1950s and

the 1970s, and that it was both a literary movement and a marketing phenomenon, identifiable by an enormous surge in book sales, translation, and recognition in both the international mainstream and academia. It is agreed, however, that the Boom comprised at least the early work of García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Carlos Fuentes. These authors are on everyone's list, while others to this day remain a matter of debate: Roberto Bolaño, for one, advocated including Rulfo (49); Cortázar was a protagonist then but has moved somewhat to the sidelines in contemporary readings of the period; the question is often raised of whether Onetti should be considered.¹² In any case, Fuentes is among those essential figures that are associated with the Boom and to a "before" and "after" both in the history of the Latin American tradition and of the inscription of that tradition in world literature.

The few authors who share Fuentes's stature play a pivotal role in the facial regime of Latin American literature. Their faces are the primordial referent against which other expressions are measured; they remain, to this day, the most globally visible figures. This helps understand what Aira's mad scientist is up against, as it constitutes a crucial element in the backdrop of images from Latin American literature that are inscribed in globalized awareness. Moreover, one should appreciate the overdetermination of these authorial figures, at the same time living national and regional monuments, celebrities, models for emerging writers, powerful social agents, brokers between local literatures and international diffusion, one-man editorial industries, icons, among other characteristics that come to surface in the form of love-hate statements familiar to any reader of more recent fiction.¹³

¹² For an overview of scholarship at the turn of the 21st century see Swanson. For a picture of the (regrettably) diminished scholarly interest in the study of Cortázar, contrast with Kerr.

¹³ Carlos Fuentes has been a diplomat for the Mexican government for years. García Márquez is a major shareholder and chairman of the board of a widely-circulating newsmagazine in Colombia, among various other similar ventures; reportedly, he acts as a *correveidile* between presidents of various nations. Vargas Llosa won the first round of the presidential election in Perú in 1990, to later lose the presidency against Alberto Fujimori.

Witness for instance Chilean author Alberto Fuguet's (Santiago 1964) description of the task of writing literature under the "far too powerful shadow cast upon the newer generations" by Boom writers as daunting: "you just stood there staring, shaking, wondering" (71-72). Likewise, consider one of the Mexican "Crack" movement manifestos' recognition of the Boom as "our citizenship, which dignifies us in front of the world" (Chávez Castañeda et al 194). The language used is symptomatic of a relationship that goes beyond the desire to kill the father figure to become the father, of asking him to step down in order for someone new to fill in the role; in its insistence it plays out the impossibility of a true *relevo generacional*, of attaining the kind of recognition that only the above-mentioned living authors have. The panorama gets all the messier when their general social prominence and functions, as opposed to their "strictly literary" importance, comes into the picture –hence the striking use of the term "citizenship." Bolaño summarizes, in a rather atypically assertive statement from someone known to relativize and to put things in perspective, what I hold these approaches to have in common: the recognition that "the literature of a Vargas Llosa or a García Márquez is *gigantic* (...) [The fact that they are public figures] should not make one lose perspective of the *hierarchy* they have. They are *superior*. Superior to those that came after them and, by the way, superior also to the writers of my generation" (2006: 49; my emphasis).

By recognizing inferiority in regards to undisputed greatness one gains some greatness; as it were, acknowledgement of the existence of a ranking is a ranking technique. In the gesture of calling attention to predecessors one finds a place under the sun. Note also this assumes a genealogical approximation to literary history, where C is heir to B and B is heir to A, a position to be discussed shortly.

A hazy, overdetermined "greatness" stems in some cases despite, and in others stimulated by, those other aspects that accompany the actual work of the founding

fathers. In both cases, this greatness is not assumed with the kind of tranquility with which one assumes, say, Cervantes's. Theirs is a troubling greatness, an invitation for creative misappropriation, as in dubbing a literary movement/sensibility "McOndo" after Macondo (Fuguet's crowd), or "Crack" after Boom (Volpi's).¹⁴ Like his contemporaries, Aira is also engaged in these diversions, but his strategy is grounded in faciality. Can the power of the image dispel a perceived hierarchy, an acknowledgment of smallness, the feeling being up against something that is greater than literature? Can this be done without close-knit literary rankings and genealogies?

The wasp episode responds to these questions in an oblique manner. A more straightforward imaginative transformation of the smallness/greatness conundrum would have a miniature writer confront a giant Author; instead, the contemporary author sends an insect, and the creature errs. Likewise, the mad scientist wants to clone Fuentes not in order to "vanquish" him, but actually, *to have someone to obey*:

Era en este punto donde el Sabio Loco más se apartaba del estereotipo del Sabio Loco, que típicamente se obstina, con un empecinamiento autodestructivo, en preservar la posición central de su inteligencia. El nuestro llegó a la conclusión de que a partir del estadio al que había arribado, sólo lograría dar el «salto hacia adelante» si encontraba el modo de salir del centro, si su inteligencia se ponía al servicio de otra inteligencia, su poder al servicio de otro poder superior... si su voluntad se degradaba dentro de un sistema de gravitaciones externas. Ahí estuvo su originalidad sin parangón (en términos de Sabio Loco): en reconocer que «otra» idea siempre es más eficaz que «una» idea, sólo por ser otra. A una idea no la enriquece ni la expansión ni la multiplicación (los clones) sino el pasaje a otro cerebro. (31-32)

[It was on this matter that the Mad Wiseman was farthest from the stereotype of the Mad Wiseman, who typically insists, with a self-destructive stubbornness, in preserving the central position of his intelligence. Ours arrived to the conclusion that from the stage he had arrived to, he would only be able to «leap forward» if he found the way of leaving the center, if his intelligence served another intelligence, if his power were placed under a superior power... if his will were degraded

¹⁴ For an overview of the early writings of McOndo, see Hargrave and Smith.

within a system of external gravitations. There laid his incomparable originality (in words of the Mad Wiseman): in recognizing that «another» idea is always more effective than «one» idea, just because it is another. An idea does not gain from expansion or multiplication (the clones) but through the passage to another brain.]

It is one thing to more or less consciously revere the figure and it is another to openly hope that it rules over us; the comic hyperbole of literary hierarchy has in this sense a liberating effect. Aira exacerbates the contradictions inherent in the figure, thus exposing them; in this way, a tale of failed obedience is at the center of *El congreso*'s staging of the confrontation of new and old. Instead of attempting to break apart the unity of «Carlos Fuentes», something which, in his language of choice, would only make the monster stronger, Aira saturates what is already overdetermined. As the silk worms grow to be giants and threaten to destroy the city where the conference is held, Fuentes and his wife rush past Aira in a Mercedes-Benz on their way to the airport.

Aira's caricature of Fuentes juxtaposes B-movie creatures with wealth and celebrity, both his own and the character's. In the first part of the novel, entitled "el hilo de Macuto," the self-obsessed protagonist finds an ancient treasure that makes him instantaneously rich and famous. Without knowing exactly how, he solves the riddle of Macuto's thread, a device left behind by pirates both to hide treasure and to recuperate it (13). The double purpose of the thread is indicative of the presence of the character Fuentes, both found and hidden in the work: the Fuentes of *El congreso* is a phantasm, a surface already extricated from the author's works. If the novel is a labyrinth, Macuto's thread is Ariadne's, and Fuentes is a 21st century Minotaur, part famous writer, part giant worm.

Accordingly, that literature is just one of the realms of public life to which Fuentes belongs does not lead to awe, but to satire. The mad scientist sets the stage for the

appearance of Fuentes, as he ponders the dilemma of whom to clone to achieve his world-domination agenda:

La solución obvia era clonar a un hombre superior... Pero no era tan fácil elegirlo. (...) Como primera medida, debía descartar (...) los que están en la cima de la pirámide visible del poder: jefes de estado, magnates, generales... No. Pensarlo nada más le provocaba una sonrisa, la misma sonrisa que se imaginaba muy bien en los labios de los verdaderos dueños del poder al oír esos nombres. (...) [E]l verdadero poder, el que hace sonreír con desdén del poder aparente, residía en otra clase de gente. Su instrumento central y definitorio era la alta cultura: la Filosofía, la Historia, la Literatura, los Clásicos. (...) Al fin se decidió por lo más simple y efectivo: por una Celebridad. Por un Genio reconocido y aclamado. ¡Clonar a un genio! Era el paso decisivo. A partir de ahí, el camino al dominio del planeta estaba expedito. (Entre otras cosas, porque la mitad ya estaba recorrido.) (32-33)

[The obvious solution was to clone a superior man... But choosing him was not that simple. (...) First, he should discard (...) those that sit on top of the visible pyramid of power: heads of State, tycoons, army generals... No. Just thinking about it drew a smile on his face, the same smile he could very well imagine drawn on the lips of the true bearers of power when they heard those names. (...) [T]rue power, the sort that makes one smile disdainfully at apparent power, resided in a different kind of people. Its central, defining instrument was high culture: Philosophy, History, Literature, and the Classics. (...) Finally, he decided to go with the simplest and most effective option: a Celebrity. A recognized, praised Genius. To clone a genius! That was the definitive step. From thereon, the road towards world domination was clear. (Among other things, because half of it was already traveled.)]

Aira contradicts himself in suggestive ways. He compares the writer to any other celebrity who lives in a fortified condo, withdrawn from fame-thirsty fans, only to ironically defend Writers as holders of secret power and true exponents of high culture. He collapses the lowbrow and the highbrow into a science fiction grand style novel, and drives the character Fuentes to a similar fate. Likewise, in one deft movement he momentarily transforms *auctoritas* into *potestas*: he smiles disdainfully from the position of true power, although he is all too aware that the statesmen and generals he mentions fleetingly do have in real life the power over life and death that

sends people to the gallows, be they writers or not. For the conspiracy theory-bound mad scientist, writers own the enigmatic smile of power.

Aira not only wants to be taken seriously, he wants to redefine what “serious” is so as to assume a role of a serious jester. By constructing an authorial presence that is interwoven with that of the mad scientist (whose name is César Aira), he confronts the impossibility of separating solemn Fuentes from his work as parallel to that of separating flippant Aira from his. Readers are to fill in the blanks without any assurance that in so doing they will not arrive at an aporia: how can Aira criticize a way of reading, a way of looking, that cannot separate man from work, tie from chest, text from aura, brand from name, if César Aira is all «César Aira» too? Whereas the participants in the literary congress cannot separate Fuentes from his social prominence and literary monument, the reader of *El congreso* is led to associate Aira with a megalomaniac trickster, memorable perhaps, but in a way that sharply contrasts with Boom monumentality.

El congreso traces a peculiar geographical trajectory in that the two “evil Geniuses who clash for world domination” are an Argentine and a Mexican who meet in a tourist hotspot in the Caribbean (Macuto, Venezuela). That Macuto is also the site of buried treasure evokes Carpentier’s concept of the *real maravilloso* and his novels, which had colonial seas as their natural setting and were avidly consumed by the postcolonial metropolis. Yet these features appear as incidents, as brush strokes on a large canvas and not as the constitutive elements of an underlying argument about the past or future of Latin American literature, or about the competition among writers and the national traditions they embody. Instead, Aira is weaving such reflections into an open-ended text that calls for an active, disobedient reader.

The conformation of the Latin American canon is just the process that the plot is playing out. Aira’s *sonrisa seria* cracks the stern face both of the Authors and of the

circuit of international literary conferences –even if César Aira is floating in the hotel’s pool while the conference is in session (39). For the mad scientist, literary critics are no better than the wasp. Existing and abundant one-sided hagiographic readings give credit to such a claim, idolatrous readings that contemplate the figure in its presumed perfection or turn back from it in the opposing but equivalent movement of vilification: “the definition of the idol is nothing other than an image that must be killed” (Mondzain 185). Cycles of erecting monuments and later bringing them down become indiscernible from market trends; hagiographic/demonizing readings privilege either use value or exchange value, as in “the work is pure art” or “the work is nothing but a commodity.” Critics walk over the debris of idols but to erect new ones out of the rubble.

Self-ironizing Aira seeks to escape this dynamic by foreclosing the possibility of his own monumentalization while parodying that of dominant figures. He mocks both pure cynical self-interest and romanticized selflessness: for the mad scientist, world-domination is almost an altruistic enterprise, certainly a pointless one. Such elements constitute a view of literary history that is marked by chaos and openness to possibility, far from responding to the genealogical, hierarchical, and ultimately deterministic, model. In this sense, if one can envision a writer’s period of true rupture with(in) the tradition as a drive to escape from monumental fixation in literary history, Aira’s motto would be “catch me if you can.” He combines a pop genre such as science fiction with meta-literary reflection, and makes them coexist in a sophisticated, highly literary prose. Some of these features are recognizable Borgesian strategies –instead of science fiction, Borges vindicated detective novels– and obey the logic of taking elements from the tradition and rearticulating them in original ways, one of them being a poetics of gesture.

There is of course much parody in Aira's gesture, as there is awareness of the ways in which parody binds, tradition being a vicious circle. As a result, Aira concentrates on *diverting* the force of the figure, not on negating it. The attack assumes the form of destabilizing gestures that challenge both the iconicity of the figure and the unstated rules of facial regimes in general. Thus, Aira applies the same kind of treatment he gives to the figure of Fuentes to that of Mao Tse Tung. Consider the following citation taken from the prologue of Osvaldo Lamborghini's *Novelas y cuentos* (1988), a compilation Aira put together after being appointed his late friend's literary executor:

Recuerdo que una noche caminábamos por el centro, y cruzamos a una prostituta de las que por entonces, hace veinte años, todavía podían verse en Buenos Aires: pintada como un mascarón, cargada de joyas baratas, con ropa chillona, gorda, vieja. Osvaldo dijo, pensativo: «¿Por qué será que los yiros parecen seres del pasado?» Yo oí mal y le respondí: «No creas. Mirá a Mao Tsé Tung.» Se detuvo, estupefacto, y me dirigió una mirada extraña. Por un instante, el malentendido abarcó a toda la literatura, y más. Han tenido que pasar tantos años y tantas cosas para que yo pudiera leer en esa mirada, o en el pasado mismo, lo que me quiso decir: «Por fin entendiste algo». (12)

[I remember one night we were walking downtown and we came across a prostitute that back then, twenty years ago, could still be seen in Buenos Aires: made-up like a figurehead, loaded with cheap jewels, wearing flashy clothes, fat, old. Osvaldo said, pensively: «Why is it that chicks [yiros] resemble beings from the past? » I did not listen well and answered: «Not quite. Have a look at Mao Tsé Tung.» He stopped, stupefied, and gave me a strange look. For an instant, the misunderstanding engulfed literature as a whole, and more. So many years have had to pass, and so many things, before I could read in that look, or in the past itself, what he wanted to tell me: «You finally understood something».]

While unearthing a lesser known Argentine author, largely unpublished during his lifetime, Aira is also cracking a joke both on Mao and on the author. Not just any kind of joke, but one that allows him to advocate for inscribing an author in the canon of

Argentine literature without reinforcing a hierarchical, genealogical view of the canon. Although in the same prologue he implies that Lamborghini writes superbly and thus deserves a more central position, this does not take him down the road toward monumentality. Furthermore, the irreverent nod to Mao, the icon, intermingles the historiography of Latin American literature with that of global iconography.

In the imagined conversation, Aira does not listen well. The question obviously arises: what *did he* hear, to answer as he does? “Chink” instead of “chick,” the translation of slang permitting. When pronounced with *rioplatense* accent, in which the “y” sound is close to the sound of “sh” in English, “yiro,” which means “prostitute” in Lunfardo, could be mistaken for “chino.” Regardless, readers know what they “heard,” and more surprisingly, know (or don’t they?) that Lamborghini considers Aira’s answer to his question to be particularly lucid –if odd, as his estranged look reveals.

Lucid about what? About literature as a whole, and, given the context, about the particular literature of Lamborghini. Capriciously, Aira reads approval in Lamborghini’s puzzled gaze, the approved-of statement being something along the lines of “Mao is like an old Buenos Aires prostitute, yet he does not seem to come from a distant past” –the kind of statement that gets a writer sent to the gallows. The fragment is narratively complex, a mere paragraph that in a few lines carries out a *mise en scène*, conjecture, and the *blurring out of meaning*. It belongs to a different study to elaborate on how the episode can be an oblique assessment of Lamborghini, whose lumpen proletariat characters, in contrast with those of more traditional forms of social realism, are presented in a particularly coarse, unheroic prose that is thematically and stylistically close to that of Sade or Bataille. Be this as it may, one may interpret how the passage involves “literature as a whole,” as Aira would have it, in regards to the transaction of prestige that underwrites it.

In the dominant (visual) economy of prestige of the Latin American writer, the obvious thing to do with an author overlooked by the canon such as Lamborghini would be to compare him to a well-respected figure, as in “Lamborghini is heir to Macedonio Fernández” or “his works are comparable to the best Quiroga.” The established transaction of cultural capital builds the prestige of the reader-writer, who oversees the comparison from above and links the emergent with the dominant, establishing him or herself as a reliable authority. For a transaction along those lines to be successful, Aira would have had to follow a certain script that did not compromise his own stature. To claim that Lamborghini is better than Shakespeare and Cervantes and Homer would be counter-productive, a devaluated endorsement; to say that he is just a darned good writer would also be counter-productive because it would not be much of an endorsement, and Aira’s own prestige might suffer too. Aira evades such a *bon sens* approach altogether and is not mindful of literary hierarchy, or any other hierarchy for that matter. His relationship to the figure diverts the power of the figure *and* cuts through different facial regimes.

A writer could hardly have as much face as Mao does. In Barry O’Neill’s terms, the face of national representatives (politicians, diplomats) “involves the group’s common belief about how much deference will be given to someone, especially in interactions that are face-to-face and publicly known” (139). Face is commonly used in this sense in expressions such as “losing face” or “saving face,” which correspond to Spanish expressions “poner la cara” or “se me cae la cara de la vergüenza.” O’Neill goes on to note that “face sets a hierarchy within [a group], and two people’s relative positions determine the rules of their interaction.” The problem, however, is that Mao and Lamborghini are hitherto *not* relative to each other. Although one could envision the deference given to Mao in relation to, say, Richard Nixon, or on the other hand that of Lamborghini in relation to Jorge Luis Borges, there are no rules for the

interaction of an emerging writer and a prostitute that vaguely evokes a major icon in the political history of the 20th century. In this sense, Aira momentarily suspends hierarchies by grouping together such unlikely figures and subjecting their interaction to an erratic rule. By placing Lamborghini in a peculiar constellation both in regards to Mao and to himself, monumentality is foreclosed.

The question thus arises: to what extent is “literature as a whole” founded on precisely the sort of transaction that Aira is avoiding? Can one read, see, be read, be seen, in such a way that reading and seeing does not lead to being fixed in a given place within different systems of hierarchies? A transvestite Mao walks into the room where the solemn ceremony of *canonization*, a concept still greatly affected by the etymology of the word, would normally be at play. The solemnity is broken, but still Lamborghini is brought to the reader’s attention. The surprise attack on a global icon that is well established in History coincides with the inscription in literary history of a local author; the unseemly gathering of prostitutes, two writers and a Chinese ruler produces as it were a short circuit in the reader’s mind that in turn does not leave Mao’s *potestas* or Lamborghini and Aira’s *auctoritas* untouched. And if one is to believe in the words of a mad scientist, neither does it leave literature itself untouched.

A Fleeting Monument

By placing gesture at the center of signification, and not in its margins, Aira challenges the conventional understanding of gesture as an ancillary element of discourse whose functions are for instance stressing a point (raising an index finger while scolding a child), or illustrating one (spreading one’s arms when talking of something huge). Discourse remains and gestures flee, they are elusive; Aira is cultivating this elusiveness as his art when he makes of gesture, precisely, the point. If

discourse, fixed and preserved in monuments in the form of Great Books or enshrined Authors, were the whole point of literature and the organizing principle of the literary establishment, what would become of literature should this certainty be seriously challenged? But is this something one can *seriously* challenge? Aira is no *enfant terrible* who defies literary propriety –which is always safeguarded by just such self-canceling categories as that of the *enfant terrible*– he plays out in his language the plight of becoming literature, of losing the edginess of living language in favor of the staleness of the monumental word. Hence the liminal, always problematic presence of the serious smile.

But can gesture escape the fixation of the gaze? A well-known line from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* (1896) illustrates the dilemma. The Red Queen explains to Alice that in her country “it takes all the running *you* can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!” (166). As if taking the advice, Aira “runs” too: “since turning back is not an option, go forward! Till the end! Running, flying, sliding, to exhaust all possibilities, to conquer serenity with the clamor of battle” (*Congreso* 41). So many things happen in Aira’s short works that the reader finds it difficult to summarize the plot or otherwise keep track of events. Readers do not have much to hold on to; the plot unfolds without offering explanations and often without the wholeness and respites offered by anticipated chapters or other pauses in the flow of discourse.

Aira even puts forward a comparison of his prose with the flow of the wind in *La costurera y el viento* (1994), where a seamstress falls in love with a wind that steals her away to Patagonia. Just as the poet Francis Ponge gave form to his poetry with a word play on his last name –a recurrent *sponge* in his works, as it were, absorbs, wipes, drains meaning– Aira’s own last name yields itself to a similar pun.¹⁵ Aira,

¹⁵ Derrida explores the connection of Ponge and sponge in a book suitably entitled *Signéponge* (1983).

aire: his works appear to be made of thin air. In the prologue to *La costurera* he states: “To seize oblivion is little more than a gesture, but it would be a gesture in accordance with my theory of literature, at least with my contempt towards memory as an instrument of the writer” (9). Similarly, one can claim that he also despises the writer as an instrument of memory, at least if we understand memory as something stale, fixed –which may be the reason why he prefers Lamborghini to other social realists.

Ubiquitous throughout his books, both the motifs of the “huida hacia adelante” or the serious smile are themselves shifting in meaning. So is the frequently present character Aira, who is always a writer one can identify with the author of the work in hand, but *also* a mad scientist, or a being from the future, a six-year old child, and so forth. It would be misleading to read such recurrent motifs “merely” as thematic elements, for they *structure* the prose. Gesture is the rule and not the exception; events are organized around gestures and not the other way around. His texts are in this sense like an impossible topological object: their surface is punctured with black holes around which every meaning gravitates and collapses, but also recombines and carries on.

Aira delivers epiphanies that oscillate between the meaningful and the meaningless; some are preceded by a build-up of suspense over more than fifty pages. Many have to do with the status of literature itself, one inextricably associated with the facial, specifically with a certain enigmatic smile that recalls the Cheshire cat’s in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Carroll’s cat vanishes “quite slowly,” and its grin “remained sometime after the rest of it had gone.” Alice remarks: “I’ve often seen a cat without a grin, (...) but a grin without a cat! It’s the most curious thing I ever saw in my life!” (74). One may point at this familiar passage by way of a partial elucidation of Aira’s poetics, for it too articulates crucial elements such as wordplay,

faciality, nonsensical epiphany, and an aesthetics of transience. Additionally, Aira's serious smile has political implications and presents itself as meta-literary reflection.

The science fiction novella *El juego de los mundos* (2000) offers an example of this complexity. In a given moment, Aira the character ruminates on whether by considering what a serious smile is, one can understand literature as a whole (71). He speaks of literature in the past tense, as in the future it has been replaced by a succession of meaningless images.¹⁶ In this avatar, the character Aira is a clone of sorts of the writer as well as a middle-aged father concerned by his son's fondness for a certain video game that pits real armies against indigenous peoples in distant planets, systematically destroying planet after planet in a far end of the universe.¹⁷

The plot evokes Adam Smith's example of the earthquake in China, whose victims do not quite arouse our sympathy because they seem so abstract, so very far away, so invisible, that in order to mobilize help we can only rely on our sense of duty (*The Theory of Moral Sentiments* III.I.46). Aira combines serious ethical reflection with the absurd, as his character is constantly told to cease being such a stubborn old man and understand that in light of recent discoveries such peoples are utterly dispensable. Interspersed with these concerns we find the meta-literary speculative question of what literature is, among other topics that do not burden down the prose of lighthearted science fiction. Throughout the work, the reader is presented with all of

¹⁶ "La serie correspondientes de imágenes era la siguiente: un combo cubano tocando una pieza ('son'), un grano de arroz ('ris'), un trébol de tres hojas solitario ('as'), y un guerrero viejo con la barba blanca ('eria', es decir 'hería', cuando combatía en su juventud). Combo, arroz, trébol, guerrero, una y otra vez... A alguien se le ocurrió aislar esa secuencia, que en una pasada de la obra de mi ancestro a velocidad normal transcurría a cinco décimas de segundo. Y, con encomiable ingenio y paciencia, logró descifrarla, es decir volver atrás en la traducción, de imágenes a palabras: 'sonrisa seria'" (*El juego* 71). Note how the passage is modeled on a newspaper *jeroglífico* puzzle.

¹⁷ A likely source for the plot is Orson Scott Card's classic sci-fi novel *Ender's Game* (1985), where the world's most talented children are taken to "Battle School" to learn the craft of preventing an alien invasion. After destroying a planet in what he thought was a simulation, Ender, the protagonist, discovers he has in fact wiped out an entire race. I thank Debra Castillo for bringing this text to my attention.

these elements at the same time, and suspects that they are related to each other but fails to grasp the relationship, or doubts whether there is one at all.

There is a missing premise in the argument about Mao and the prostitutes, just as there is a gap between the Smithean moral dilemma and its development in the plot: Aira discovers that the reason why he is so stubbornly concerned with the game is that in the end it will reinstate the idea of God, long overcome in this futuristic society. How so? The text creates the space for readers to fill in the blank should they care to, and indeed it is interesting to wonder whether Smith's sense of duty, an exception in a moral system otherwise based on emotions, could in fact be related to divine intervention.¹⁸ But this speculation results from getting carried away, which is perhaps what the plot calls for, as it blurs out the philosophical discussion and simultaneously arrives at a narrative climax in the following delightfully faulty argument:

Los mundos, por ser reales, son particularidades que ocupan cada vez el campo entero de la realidad, y no dejan espacio más que para un ser ultraparticular, una generalidad singular, que sería justamente la vieja y archipodrida idea de Dios. Eso sería el fin de nuestra sociedad tal como la conocemos, y la vuelta al viejo mundo puesto a cargo del Señor. (61)

[The worlds, because they are real, are particularities that each time occupy the entire field of reality, and they do not leave space but for an ultra-particular being, a singular generality, that would be precisely the old and ultra-rotten idea of God. That would be the end of our society as we know it, and the return to an old world for the Lord to take charge of.]

The text fills the reader with anticipation, everything points to a revelation, an epiphany... and then, "nothing happens." The negative of cathartic relief, these revelations are turns of the screw that initiate a new cycle of speculation. Without missing a beat, the episode continues:

¹⁸ For a reading of the worlds as evocations of Leibniz's monads, see García 2003.

Pensaba desarrollar más la idea, pero no me dejó:

-Lo que me estás describiendo es exactamente la mecánica de tu propia obra, César (idem).

[I was going to elaborate on the idea, but he did not let me:

-What you are describing is exactly the mechanics of your own work, César.]

Explanations cut short, illuminations that lead to dark alleys, and obscure passages that result in epiphany; in a word: Aira. The line of reasoning from video game to God to poetics of the oeuvre incurs at least in two fallacies: a slippery slope and an enthymeme, understood respectively as an argument that results from affirming that an event must inevitably follow from another without proof that this is in fact inevitable, and an argument that suppresses either a premise or its conclusion. Similar para-argumentative procedures are at the center of Aira's understanding of his own literature (as they were for Carroll, who was a logician by trade). A detailed inventory of faulty arguments constitutes the vertebrae of an unpredictable narration, one thus capable of surprising the reader every time. Beyond suspension of disbelief, the plot calls for suspension of clear-headedness and even good judgment; dazzling leaps of faith take the place of a gradual overcoming of the reader's skepticism. The cool, cerebral style is peppered with humorous, timely colloquialisms (*yiro*) and idiosyncratic turns (*archipodrida*).

Like the Cheshire cat's, the grin floats in the air. The air, a distinctly elusive prose, is made of sly arguments, colloquialism, erudition, a smooth surface that asks the reader to read on. The grin is not a smile but a *sonrisa seria*, the kind that one cannot pin down: air does not yield itself to monumentality. Literature is less about memory than it is about literature; literature is fleeting moments of illumination ("fogonazos").

Aira articulates elements from the tradition, such as Borgesian intellectual games and erudite voice or magical realism's hyperbolic visuality and the "poker face" with which its narrators turns the outlandish into verisimilar. The articulation, though, proposes a model of inscription within the tradition, and of the tradition within a larger whole, that resists the paralysis of monumentalization and of its facial regime. One may be inclined to follow a genealogical approach and say that Aira "inherits" such traces, yet it is best to suspend the family tree approach altogether and appreciate Aira's aesthetic project in its amplitude, as one that opens itself up to the unpredictable. If one lets the mad scientist have his way, the constellation Borges-magical realism-Aira should be as erratic and suggestive as the constellation Aira-Lamborghini-Mao.

The *sonrisa seria* is an ambiguous cipher that appears in many of Aira's texts, an emblem of sorts for an aesthetic ideal that combines restraint and release. In the moment when the plot is about to be too much, about to break the pact of verisimilitude, so over-the-top that previous peaks of the incredible cannot account for the leap that is going to take place, then comes non-sensical revelation, relieving dramatic tension and blurring out meaning. As in Aira's imagined conversation with Lamborghini, *el malentendido abarcó la literatura toda* [the misunderstanding engulfed literature as a whole]. Yet these *malentendidos* have effects. Aira cannot *tell* what he understands by literature, as in "something that must remain open"; this is something he has to *show*. Just as gestures proper are not seamlessly translatable into verbal language, Aira's verbal gestures are not easily reducible to arguments, summaries, or critical discourse. Again, the game is "catch me if you can," and this is not a game one should want to win. The concrete *effects* of each gesture ask to be evaluated by themselves.

Why, then, Mao? Why «Carlos Fuentes» *and* Mao? This far-fetched grouping is similar to Andy Warhol's famous gathering of iconic images from different realms of culture in a series of prints. It would be misleading to claim that the montage of a brand (Campbell's soup), a celebrity/object of desire (Marilyn Monroe), and a Chinese ruler, among others, can be translated into the claim that these figures are identical. [Fig. 1] Far from it, Warhol is setting the stage for the viewers' reflection, opening space for questions such as: "To what extent are we relating to propaganda as we relate to advertisement?," "Why do we identify ourselves with these images?," "What kinds of communities are defined by how we relate to this montage?," "What role does consumerism play in art?," "What is ideological about Marilyn Monroe or Campbell's soup?," or "What are the relations between the realms that these images represent?." Warhol's is a game of "show and *don't* tell." So is Aira's. That in this game Fuentes should be Latin American literature's Marilyn Monroe is something to reflect on: the overdetermination of the figure of the Great Latin American Writer is well served by the questions brought up by this montage.

An initial answer to the question of "why Mao and Carlos Fuentes" is then that they are both the visual representation of an order of things and the limits of a mode of rule. Their presence determines the horizon and orients the gaze: the figure of the iconic writer agglutinates around it the practices of readers, writers, and critics, perhaps even of citizens inasmuch as the figure belongs to national patrimony. The same face may serve contradictory purposes, as a bewildering placeholder that appears in incongruous equations. One can, as it were, "hoist the flag" of an iconic Boom writer in the name of high literature, good taste and the sophistication of modernist prose, or in the name of the popular, of the invisible to a certain extent made visible by the figure and its prose. However, the many contradictions exposed by the works of an author and the tension between these works and the bigger picture are placated by the

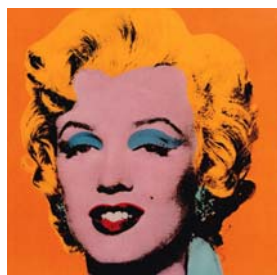


Figure 1: Marilyn. 1962. Andy Warhol-Museum, Medzilaborce. 4 Nov.

2007 < http://www.slowakische-kulturtage.de/presse/sk_marylin.jpg >

Mao. 1973. Museo d'Arte Moderna "Vittoria Colonna," Pescara. 4 Nov.

2007 <<http://www.scuolaromana.com/img/04%5B1%5D.%20MAO.JPG>>

Campbell's Soup Cans. (Detail). 1962. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

4 Nov. 2007

<http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=79809>

monumental presence of the figure, *mutatis mutandis*, in a similar way to how the icon of a saint puts a visible end to theological discussion about, say, the making of the divine in the Christian tradition. How to reveal the contradictions that lie under the calm surface of an image? How to challenge an aspect of the face's evocative power – like its monumentality, marketability or political representativity – without canceling it all together? How not to throw away the baby with the bathwater, if all aspects of the figure come to the gaze at once?

As Marie-José Mondzain explores at length in *Image, Icon, Economy* (1996, Trans. 2005), destroying an icon in no way undermines its power. Drawing loosely from her argument, one may observe that while iconoclasts consider that the reverence of the image is idolatry, thus barbarism, iconophiles consider that the destruction of the image is barbaric. In this sense, a direct attack at the iconic figure, be it Mao or Fuentes or whomever, would result in sheer slapstick, would cancel itself out. One cannot challenge the belief in Christ by destroying crosses; this would only reinforce existing beliefs. One could bring in a new figure or god to take the place of the previous god, but the structure of allegiance to a figure would remain the same. Aira prefers to divert the power of the icon instead of trying to destroy it. Likewise, he does not make haste to replace one certainty with another, but dwells in the moment of perplexity, of being caught off base: as it were, between certainties. Perplexity will not in and of itself change the rules of a facial regime, but it sets the space for the disobedient reader to intervene. It elicits a different look at things. The power of the icon rests on a series of hard-to-grasp, unstated trajectories; it is relational and manifests in the daily lives of people, in ways of reading and seeing, of being read and seen. These trajectories are fixed and stable, and one only realizes that they are there when they are estranged. For all the leaps of faith and reasoning in Aira's work, there

is also a very gradual and persistent reconfiguration of the reader's relation to iconic figures both in the literary tradition and beyond.

Aira's response to the puzzle of how to stand up to the icon is thus: divert, do not confront; sting the tie, not the writer. Consider the ending to *El juego de los mundos*, where César decides to uproot the idea of God once and for all. He "pierces through reality" until he is able to have a face-to-face encounter –except God is de-faced:

Aquí estaba Dios, frente a mí. Lo que nadie había visto nunca, yo lo estaba viendo, y no era un espectáculo muy edificante. Dios resultó ser un exoedro de cartón con patas de araña y peluca rubia, de unos cuarenta centímetros de alto. Pero no tuve tiempo para contemplarlo mucho porque se me tiró encima con un salto limpio de ocho metros por lo menos. (...) No sé cómo, terminé agarrándolo por la peluca, y de un tirón se la arranqué. Como noté que el Bicho, en el intento de recuperarla, aflojaba su abrazo, la arrojé con todas mis fuerzas hacia adelante. Fue una buena decisión porque se dejó caer a mis pies y empezó a reptar hacia ella. (76)

[God was right there, in front of me. What nobody had seen ever, I was seeing, and it wasn't a very edifying spectacle. God turned out to be a cardboard exohedron with spider legs and a blond wig, about fifteen inches tall. But I did not have much time to contemplate it because it flung itself on top of me with a long-jump of at least twenty-five feet. (...) I don't know how I managed to grab it by the wig, and with one pull I took it off. As I realized that the Bug, trying to recuperate it, started to let go, I threw the wig forward with all my strength. It was a good decision because It fell at my feet and began to crawl towards the wig.]

The brawl becomes a chase, a "persecución futbolística," as Aira kicks the wig forward and this defaced God chases him. César does not "render unto God what belongs to God"; rather, the quest for destroying Him –or Her or It– leads César, inexplicably, to re-create time and space as they soar through a hitherto empty cosmos. The character Aira does not become God, he is more of an idol on the run, hard to fix in place. Aside from providing comic relief, as in the capitalized pronoun or the noun "Bicho," the absurd collage of God and Aira (Author) undermines both their

solemnities, as does the confrontation of Lamborghini (Author) and Mao. Aira goes against Faces, but does not offer his own face in return to fill in the gap in the visual structure of power. There are only gestures, fleeting seconds, not a face to hold on to. Each gesture is unique; at the same time that César realizes he has never been in that situation before –the reader concurs– he realizes it will just never happen again: “it was the last time that something like that could happen, and so I was poking an irreversible hole into the idea of God. This could happen just once and never again” (78). A gesture does not linger more than the concept of exohedron does: the time it takes to try to imagine one such object, a polyhedron presumably, and then realize the prefix *-exo* does not denote quantity but the condition of being outside of something, as in “exoskeleton,” is the time it takes for the concept to vanish. And the narration carries on.

Aira’s exploration of facial regimes puts the reader in a position of being as it were looked back upon, interpellated, activated. He takes faces that are all presence and no gesture (God, Author, Leader) and turns them into absence and gesticulation, thus exposing the negativity of facial regimes. If Latin America’s place within world literature is fixed, among other factors, by face and presence, the established trajectories may be diverted by the labor of the negative. A deeply felt absence can be more noteworthy than presence on a screen –both the curse and blessing of the writer-as-celebrity. That visual practices are an increasingly dominant symbolic currency does not entail that visual capital is defined as the appropriative accumulation of iconic images: the ephemeral and the monumental can interact, too. If Franco Moretti is right in claiming that “the way we imagine comparative literature is a mirror of how we see the world” (qtd. in Sánchez-Prado 22), then gestures that destabilize the former might transform the latter.

Much like Deleuze and Guattari's Jesus, the figures of the Boom are the beginning of times but also the end of history, if a premature one: should the telos of Latin American literature be its inscription in the global, and the Boom achieved this, where is one to go next? If the Boom were only about a moment of transcendence, how to look back to it from a relatively globalized era where immanence is the dominant trope, yet the periphery is still subordinated? The answer to this question is that something is wrong with the telos. Recurrent dichotomies like *autocóctonos* vs. *cosmopolitas*, localists vs. globalists, need to be overcome –that is, overcome *again*, for this is a challenge that comes back anew: Borges had to reconcile tango with metaphysics, García Márquez vallenato with international labor relations. Aira's transvestite *Mao porteño* manages to be both local and global; moreover, to articulate local and global. Out of weariness from the telos, the genealogy itself must be transformed: nuance is required where straightforward inheritance or lack thereof has prevailed as a way to relate the contemporary and the Boom. The question is less how contemporary authors stem from predecessors but how their presence affects, if at all, the whole ecology of the web of relations known as tradition. With Aira, one may advocate for less talk of generations and more of events that transform the ensemble.

Gestures are always *situated*. There is no pure gesture, in the sense that there can be none without a body to begin with (hence Carroll's fantasy). By underscoring gesture then, one draws attention to a performance that is always unique. Stressing the uniqueness of Latin American literature, not to be mistaken with exclusiveness, exceptionality or exoticism, is a way of reversing the effect of an excessively monumental, quieting reading of the canon.¹⁹ Aira reads tradition as an ongoing

¹⁹ Brett Levinson criticizes "Latin Americanism's general tendency to confuse literature or the novel with the Great Book." He goes on to note that "The Great Book, particularly the novel –always reminiscent of the Great Book, the Bible– is the modern cultural artifact that has been posited as the representation of all culture and all cultural production. The Book is the artifact-supposed-to-be-All. Monumental, the Great Book transcends the works that belong to a particular time and place, the passing trends, the productions that pass through history but do not endure, so as to reflect and preserve

performance that cannot be cancelled out under a narrow understanding of “Boom,” “magical realism” or any other label of the sort. He does so under the banner of the serious smile, a gesture that lies between Mao’s and the Cheshire cat’s, as seen through the looking-glass of a contemporary Argentine writer.

Perhaps we will look back at the history of 20th century (Latin American) literature following the “clear and distinct” path traced by the gestures of Doctor Aira. Meanwhile, Carlos Fuentes, who is now approaching his eightieth birthday, sets his recent novel *La silla del águila* (2003) in the year 2020 and refers to it in passing as the year the Nobel prize was granted to César Aira (149).

eternally the entirety, the very being, of culture and history” (Valdés and Kadir, Eds. 3: 346).

CHAPTER 2

PERFORMANCE ART, CONCEPTUALISM, AND THE PRAXIS OF WRITING FOR A GLOBAL AUDIENCE FROM CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICA

I cannot and should not let myself be made
into a possible art object.

Johannes Rau, secretary of education of
Nordrhein-Westfalen, 1972.²⁰

Since the mid-nineties, prominent Latin American writers have increasingly engaged practices associated with contemporary art in their work. One may find various degrees of imbrication between the arts and the written word, ranging from conventional story-telling that takes art as its topic, as in Roberto Bolaño, to an all-out defense of a continuum between art and literature, as in Mario Bellatin. Indeed, never since the *vanguardias* has there been in Latin American literature, and most recently also in its criticism, such a meaningful exploration about the relations between different creative media.²¹

This chapter contributes to the discussion by focusing on the following questions: what literary forms result when Latin American literature “wears the hat” of contemporary art? And how are we to address them critically? As we shall see, authors borrow conceptualism and performance art’s exploration of the problematic of the art-

²⁰ “Im Wissenschaftsministerium erklärt Minister Rau auf die Frage, warum er nicht selbst in die Akademie gehe, um mit Beuys zu verhandeln: ‘Ich kann und darf mich nicht zum möglichen Kunstobjekt machen lassen’” (Adriani, Konnertz, and Thomas 166).

²¹ For recent historiographical revisions of Duchamp’s influence on Latin America, see Antelo and Speranza. For an account on the relations between Latin American literature and the arts, see Laddaga 2006. Current debates on the articulation of these realms are regularly featured in the journals *Otra parte: revista de letras y artes*, *Ramona: revista de artes visuales*, *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas*, and *Punto de vista* (which, after thirty years of circulation, published its final number on April, 2008).

object as a way of rearticulating their place within global culture. As the loci of enunciation of Latin American literature seek recognition beyond the realm of the national, they find in art compensation for some of the limitations of their traditional literary readerships. Let us then analyze how the gesture of borrowing the concerns and methods of contemporary art leads to imagine global culture in different ways.

Paris Air in the Polluted Skies of Mexico City

In a monographic study on Copi (Raúl Damonte, 1939-1987), Aira makes a statement that one may take as indicative of the exploration of different media that takes place in Latin American literature. He supposes that if Copi had never written a word but had followed “exclusively the path of plastic arts, drawing or acting,” his stories would have remained the same, “as a sort of ‘script’ for other gestures, and would, at some point, have been vented in a lightning flash of thought or life” (Basualdo 20, from *Copi*). Aira thus portrays a rather exceptional author, who wrote novels and plays, but who also drew comics, as the illustration of a rule according to which every author in some sense hesitates between the pen and the brush.

Aira sees Copi’s genre-bending work as a springboard to launch an expansive interrogation of the literary.²² In doing so, he draws from conceptualism, in a nutshell, the tendency in art for which the concept “behind” a work of art should come to the foreground and even take its place. Classic examples are a group exhibition at Seth Siegelaub’s gallery in 1965 that consisted solely of the catalogue for that exhibition; Joseph Kosuth’s “One and Three Chairs” (1965), in which he placed side by side a chair, a picture of a chair and an enlarged dictionary definition of the word “chair”; or

²² Incidentally, the art curator Carlos Basualdo, who quotes the cited passage, introduces Aira to a larger audience in the artworld.

the painting by René Magritte famous for the jarring effect of presenting a drawing of a pipe and the caption “*Ceci n’est pas une pipe*” (1968).²³ Whereas conceptualism was steering the practice of art from the emphasis on the finished plastic form into the realm of language and concept, Aira interrupts with a conceptualist gesture the regular operations of a medium already based on language and concept so as to come back to it with a new outlook.

Throughout his own work, Aira repeatedly invites the reader to see his texts as “incomplete,” that is, not as finished products but as proposals for an unrealized project. One may perhaps more easily imagine the Siegelauß catalogue turned into a “physical” exhibition than one of Aira’s *novelitas* turned into something “more real,” but it is precisely this perplexity that Aira is aiming at. Consequently, in his statement about Copi, Aira’s gesture paradoxically consists in calling for art to become a subset of an expanded notion of the literary. On the other hand, conceptualism, and contemporary art in general, are already the result of an expansion of a field formerly limited to sculpture and painting.

An interesting problem arises then if we are to locate writers such as Aira and Mario Bellatin in the tradition of artists like Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) and Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), who inaugurated contemporary art’s ongoing exploration about the status of the art-object. As we zero in on this question, we observe that whereas Bellatin draws *indistinctly* from the traditions of conceptualism and performance art, or rather, recovers the potency of a moment in the late 60s and early 70s when the two were indiscernible, Aira flirts with performance but is more indebted to conceptualism. In this sense, Aira remains more bound to text than Bellatin, if by “text” we mean the narrow, physical sense of a form that you, the reader, hold in your hands at this moment.

²³ See Kosuth and Siegelauß.

Let us consider in detail a work by Aira that has a crucial role in the process of “appropriation of art” that is at stake here: “Duchamp en México” (1997), a *novelita* that tells the story of an Argentine tourist who kills time in Mexico City by compulsively buying books. Presenting the following citations side by side will reveal the conceptualist nature of Aira’s endeavor:

In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. (...) [A]ll planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes the machine that makes the art. (LeWitt 43)

En realidad, es un género nuevo y promisorio: no las novelas, de las que ya no puede esperarse nada, sino su plano maestro, para que la escriba otro; (...) ya no habrá más novelas, al menos como las conocemos ahora: las publicadas serán los esquemas, y las novelas desarrolladas serán ejercicios privados que no verán la luz. Y la publicación tendrá un sentido; uno comprará los libros para hacer algo con ellos, no sólo leerlos o decir que los lee. (17) [In reality, it is a new and promising genre: not the novels, of which nothing can be expected, but their master plan, so that someone else writes them; (...) there will be no more novels, at least not as we know them: what will get published will be outlines, and the developed novels will be private exercises that will not see the light of day. And the publication will have sense; one will buy books to do something with them, not just read them or say that one reads them.]

The first citation comes from Sol LeWitt’s 1967 manifesto of conceptualism; the second is rumination by the novel’s protagonist.²⁴ They both share with the statement on Copi the thrust to distance the work of art, to postpone the audience’s encounter with the actual thing, if not foreclosing it altogether. These are paradoxical gestures, for on the one hand Aira’s text is a loosely-narrated novel and not an *esquema* for a future novel, and on the other, LeWitt’s paragraph is in itself an execution, so how could it be “perfunctory”?

²⁴ For an account of conceptualism as a global, as opposed to a primarily European or American phenomenon, see Camnitzer et al.

In these cases perplexity is a way of causing an effect. Perplexity can reveal a malfunction in the machine of the art industry: a concept, being nothing to hold on to, cannot be bought or collected for profit. By following this line of thought, early conceptualism and related movements were keen on criticizing the institutions of art patronage and their business-like mentality, thus constituting “institutional critique,” understood as a way of changing art institutions from within, through the effect of works of art.²⁵ Duchamp’s famous urinal-based ready-made *Fountain* (1917) had anticipated this tendency, inasmuch as it stirred a debate that revolutionized both artistic and museographic practices [Fig. 2]. Similar moments of rupture entail an activation of the audience and lead to an expansion of the field.

Aira’s reader is also activated in this sense, as well as interpellated as the potential writer of the unwritten novels of the future. Such an interpellation relies on the nonsensical, of course, since those novels themselves would have to be projects-for-a-novel that another reader would complete in private. This in turn would take us full circle back to where we were, in a deliberately unproductive mode of exchange that underlies Aira’s oeuvre and that Vecchio has fittingly described as a “máquina célibe” [celibate machine] (171).

Aira wields the project-novels against the melancholy of the loosely autobiographical protagonist. “Esquemas” [models] are not only a pastime that will distract him from boredom, but the cure against “la maldición turística” [the touristic curse] (10). In effect, the impossible circulation of the project-novel parodies the underlying structures behind tourism as a practice of globalized consumerism.

²⁵ Sandra Contreras holds a different view: “no se trata, en la poética de Aira, de la vanguardia como autocritica de la ‘institución arte’ sino antes bien de la vanguardia entendida, primordialmente, como reinención del proceso artístico” (16). I do not think that these two functions are incompatible or that “reinención” should have the upper hand. Although the appropriation of art that takes place in Aira’s poetics does not foreclose a criticism of the institution of art, it mostly saps its energy and drives it into a criticism of the institution of literature. On the concept of institutional critique, see Fraser.



Figure 2: Fountain. 1917. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia. 3 Jan. 2008.

<http://arthistorian.files.wordpress.com/2007/08/duchamp_fountain.jpg>

Whereas tourism is supposed to be the rich experience that interrupts the empty time of work, Aira gives an account of tourism as a lacuna that has to be filled. Likewise, he accentuates the already infantilizing experience of the tourist when he offers such outlines “de novela para llenar, como un libro para colorear [of a fill-in novel, like a color book]” (16). In an oblique way he invites the reader to realize that tourism *is* work; tourism is the counterpoint in the music of labor among those who can afford traveling (and reading).²⁶

Aira displaces the initial gesture of conceptualism into a critique of the political economy of tourism and he uses the absurd to expose its dynamics. Local color is openly neglected in favor of an internal monologue that takes place within a narrative not of seizing the traveled-by land with one’s gaze, camera or travel journal, but a narrative of the greed involved in looking for a souvenir at the best price possible. The one souvenir that the narrator is obsessed with is, he says, “just the kind of book one is not supposed to buy when coming to Mexico”: a book not about Rivera, Orozco, Frida Kahlo or Dr. Atl, but about Duchamp (15).

The book in question is already overcoded in being simultaneously the antagonist of the project-novel and a souvenir, a commercial relic of Mexico City. Nonetheless, in a typical Airan move he will keep on adding mind-boggling layers of meaning to the object as it becomes the center of an absurd operation of financial speculation: by purchasing in different libraries throughout the city multiple copies of the book, every time a little cheaper, Aira states he *gains* the difference in regards to the original cost. The confusion, along with a series of faulty calculations, gradually leads him to believe he has saved 197136 million pesos (37). We can interpret this latter operation as a hyperbole of the psychology of the bargain: when we buy something we do not need that is “on sale,” the truth is we spend, and yet feel that we save. Additionally,

²⁶ For theorizations on tourism, see MacCannell and Augé.

Aira's purchases are made possible by a sudden rise in his buying power due to currency exchange, as he writes, "era tal la devaluación del peso mexicano, que el monto real seguía siendo insignificante [the devaluation of the Mexican peso was such, that the real amount was still insignificant]" (32).

Aira invests the object with all these layers of meaning simultaneously. Although one may distinguish them for the purposes of analysis, the novel consistently juxtaposes things such as a critique of the status of the art object, tourism, commodity fetishism, and international economic transactions. This constellation of elements is in itself an interpretative puzzle and admittedly there is more than one way of connecting the dots. In following the thread of conceptualism, it is useful to consider one of Sandra Contreras' key contributions to the criticism of Aira, the idea that the author "se sitúa históricamente *como si fuera* un vanguardista en los orígenes de la vanguardia [situates himself historically *as if he were* an avant-gardist at the origins of the avant-garde]" (15; my emphasis).²⁷ However, in order to appreciate the Airean project in its vitality, the "as if" has to be suspended: Aira *places himself historically* at the origins of the avant-garde. Anacronism is less an instance of poetic license than a point of departure towards changing the encapsulating way we tell the story of novelty as an interest of the past. Aira does not seek to "resurrect" the project of the avant-gardes, rather he shows that it was never dead.

Following Peter Bürger, Contreras uses the term "historical avant-garde" in order to offer generalizations about how in Aira, as in authors associated with those movements, process precedes product. While such a statement is correct, it risks falling into what it criticizes, that is, treating process as a product. Even though at a

²⁷ Contreras concentrates on formal aspects of Aira's narrative in relation to the Argentine context, but she also offers insight into the specificity of the link between Aira and what she calls "la vanguardia clásica," referring among others to Duchamp, Roussel, and the surrealists. Roussel's parodic travel narrative of *Impressions d'Afrique* (1963) serves as a likely inspiration to "Duchamp en México," as well as an evident precedent to *Nouvelle impressions du Petit-Maroc* (1991).

general level there is a family resemblance between Aira's writing and a wide-ranging set of practices from different artists, as well as the musician John Cage and his peers at Fluxus, accounting for particular gestures is a different story. Only in relation to such gestures can one seize a certain tension between singularity and continuity that is at work. Contreras takes steps in this direction when she reads Aira's *El vestido rosa* (1984) less in terms of a general invocation to historical avant-garde, than specifically in relation to Duchamp's "The Large Glass" (1915-1923) (65-66). Since the devil is in the details, one will do best in following this latter example and concentrating in the ways in which specific works by Duchamp manifest themselves in the text at hand.

In considering the ambiguous treatment of the purchased book in "Duchamp en México" as a book about Duchamp and a work of art in itself ("salí de la librería con mi Duchamp bajo el brazo" 24), it is enlightening to take a look at the original inception of three works by the French artist that are likely to have served as inspiration for Aira: "Paris Air" (1919), "Box in a Valise" (1935-1941), and "Trap" (1917).

Upon quitting France for the United States, Duchamp asked a pharmacist to empty a glass ampoule, let it fill with air and then seal it up again: "I thought of it as a present for Arensberg, who had everything money could buy. So I brought him an ampoule of Paris Air" (Schwarz 676) [Fig. 3]. The resulting *objet trouvé* is extremely fragile (as is Aira's pact of verisimilitude) and an act of thievery in its taking something that is free and turning it into something commercially valuable. Originally it was, nonetheless, a gift: a token of appreciation for someone, ironically enough Duchamp's life-long patron, for whom nothing could be bought.

Among the many critical stances towards this work, Duchamp's own retrospective glance results most interesting for our purposes. In "Box in a Valise," conceived at a time when the artist had already established an international reputation, he puts



Figure 3: Air de Paris (50cc. of Paris Air). 1919. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia. 2 Jan. 2008

<http://content.cdlib.org/xtf/data/13030/88/ft9h4nb688/figures/ft9h4nb688_00055.jpg>



Figure 4: Box in a Valise (From or by Marcel Duchamp or Rose Sélavy). 1935-41. Museum of Modern Art, New York. 2 Jan. 2008.

<http://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_1/News/images/BoxInValiseBIG.jpg>

together a smaller version of “Paris Air” with a collection of miniatures of his most famous works to date [Fig. 4]. If the originals, which were not “original” in the same sense as previous art –the ampoule was on the pharmacist’s shelf before becoming an art-object, the bicycle-wheel was meant to be ridden around– were themselves a criticism of the mystification of the one-of-a-kind masterpiece predominant in Western art historiography, the “Box” is Duchamp’s attempt to avert the mystification of his own previous work. In this sense, the miniatures are an act of self-devaluation.²⁸

“Paris Air” is set to “cure” a rich man from the affliction of being beyond a gift economy while satirizing the condition of Paris as an object of desire. Aira infuses this ironical pharmacological evocation into the question of the devaluation of the singular explored in “Box in a Valise.” Just as you could carry around Duchamp’s life work in a piece of luggage, the tourist is meant to bring a foreign land home in the form of a souvenir. Note how Aira conflates the traces of both Duchamp’s works:

El secreto de la industria del turismo, a la que este país le da tanta importancia, está en miniaturizar los tesoros nacionales, para que el visitante pueda comprarlos y llevárselos en la valija. Eso es lo que hace funcionar al turismo en la sociedad de consumo. (...) Ya mi venerado Duchamp, ese precursor, metió aire de París en una ampolla de vidrio. Y si lo que tiene para ofrecer un país es la vida regalada de sus playas, basta con hacer a escala reducida una representación del tiempo. (30)

[The secret of the tourism industry, to which this country grants so much importance, lies in miniaturizing the national treasures so that the visitor can buy them and take them in the valise. That is what makes tourism function in the society of consumption. (...) My revered Duchamp, that precursor, had already put air of Paris in a glass ampoule. And if what a country has to offer is the giveaway life of its beaches, it suffices to make a reduced-scale representation of time.]

²⁸ Self-devaluation is a constant in Aira’s compulsive publication of up to four novels a year: “La superproducción, la multiplicación, implica desde ya y por sí misma una devaluación. (...) Aira lo publica *todo*, indiscriminadamente: las novelas buenas y *también* las malas (las dudosas, las tontas)” (Contreras 133).

Aira does not mention Duchamp's "Box," although the opening lines of "Duchamp en México" allude to an inverted jack-in-the-box that contains instead of liberating.²⁹ Thus, Aira inverts the fiction of the souvenir as something that captures reality and offers instead a view of the tourist caught in the souvenir. The ludic nature of these operations, which was present in the "Box in a Valise" when items such as the urinal became toys, both underscores a certain vitality in the experience of art and clashes against the deadly serious consequences of the "game" of financial speculation. After calculating the astronomical value of his savings through buying multiple books and declaring that still it was practically nothing due to the devaluation of the Mexican peso, the protagonist remarks that "el jornal de un obrero aquí es de veintitrés pesos [the daily wage of a worker here is twenty-three pesos]" (37).³⁰

Consequently, the political dimension of "Duchamp en México" results from its being a "maqueta de implosión" [implosion model] (32). This is the turning point where Aira's borrowing of contemporary art's institutional critique mutates into a subtle form of negative ideology critique. Could capitalism implode if present-day tourism did? Wouldn't it be the other way around? Capitalism *would* implode if our naturalized link to the commodity became so estranged that our libidinal attachment to the souvenir could be exposed as fetishism. Aira foregrounds this possibility by imagining an act of accounting –putting receipts together to keep track of travel expenses– becoming "nothing but" a work of art. Indeed, the protagonist fantasizes with preparing a book-installation of the receipts of the increasingly cheaper books he has bought: "el libro que me propongo publicar podría consistir únicamente de reproducciones facsimilares de los tickets, ampliadas al tamaño que tiene el libro en

²⁹ "El cofre con la cabeza de payaso que salta, pero al revés: con el resorte apuntado para adentro, y yo con él. Un palacio, ¡clac! ¡Adentro conmigo! Una iglesia, ¡clac! Un museo, ¡clac! Se cerró la tapa, y yo la miro desde el fondo, atontado, incrédulo" (7).

³⁰ Under Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000), the Mexican peso devaluated in 174% (Banco de México).

cuestión sobre Duchamp [the book I intend to publish could consist solely on facsimilar reproductions of the tickets, enlarged to fit the size of the said book about Duchamp]” (26-27).

The action seeks to revert the process that leads to the coffee-table book, which stands at the endpoint of a trajectory that turns art into information. There is no irony left in a luxury object that cancels out the creative forces “still” to be found in Duchamp; it signals the emptiness of a project. The project-novel rises as its antagonist: whereas in the coffee-table book commercialism has won over creation, in the project-novel we find a restitution of the productive tension between creation and commercialism that was always at the heart of Duchamp’s practice.

Later on in the text Aira exacerbates commodity fetishism and turns it into idolatry proper. Such is the rationale behind the enigmatic passage in which out of the blue someone hands the Virgin Mary’s viscera to the protagonist (36). The narrator claims so conspicuously that this random episode (“*historieta intercalada*”) has nothing to do with the master plan of the project-novel that one is led to believe that it is actually its climax: the moment when the religion of capitalism is revealed. This interpolation of the religious relic into the realm of commercial relics parodies, through nonsense, the convertibility of capital. If anything, sacred or profane, can be measured according to its exchange value, then in some sense anything can turn into something else. Thus for Aira, the religious relic, described as a “*fábrica preciosa*” [precious factory], can turn into a turtle’s viscera (37).

Although it would be excessive to claim that Aira uses the estrangement of his fiction to bring down capitalism, his work constituting some kind of guerrilla warfare disguised as experimentalism, it does speak in oblique ways to various aspects of the malaise associated with globalization.³¹ Zygmunt Bauman’s observation that in the

³¹ See Deirdre and Masiello (392) for arguments that defend readings along those lines.

contemporary globalized world mobility has become a stratifying factor illustrates this point. According to Bauman's argument, mobility reinforces an upper class of those who are free to travel, while those who are bound to a place constitute the new lower classes, the "losers" of globalization (85). Thus, while "globals" become the subject of the triumphalist narrative of globalization, "locals" become its object.

Indeed, early on in the text Aira deploys the objectifying perception of the tourist, when he listens to musical notes played on an accordion in the street and says "Sólo puede decirse: es un acordeón, y alguien lo toca. No vi que nadie le diera nada, y si es por lo que hace, yo diría que no se lo merece; pero él no se propone por lo que hace sino por lo que es: un mendigo [It can only be said: it is an accordeon, and someone plays it. I did not see anyone giving him anything, and, judging by what he does, I would say he does not deserve it; but he does not stand for what he does but for what he is: a beggar]" (13). This situation changes when the "imploding mechanism" of the project-novel "inverts" the subject-object relation and the narrative of the wandering tourist becomes a self-reflective tale in which the tourist gaze stands as the object of discourse. However, this operation leads to aporia: "Me objetivé, pero no en el sentido correcto, como los mexicanos objetivados que veo fluir a mi alrededor todo el tiempo, sino al revés, como un sujeto abstracto bajo examen de una conciencia segunda [I became objective, but not in the right way, like the objectivized Mexicans I see flow around me all the time, but the other way around, like an abstract subject under the scrutiny of a second conscience]" (10). In this way, through nonsense and paradoxical loops, Aira narrates the contradictory ways in which our relationships to objects and people are estranged by globalization.

We may thus regard "Duchamp en México" itself as a Mexican handcraft for export, or rather as an aporetic exploration of the problematic thereof. While there is no "correct reading" of a text as open-ended as this one, observe how by breaking the

truce between consumerism and the art object it sets loose a series of enquiries: from wondering about the place of the book on the shelves and counters of bookstores, we move to questioning our place in the world. How often are the words “Duchamp” and “México” in the same sentence? What kind of cultural expectations come to mind in relation to the name “Marcel Duchamp” that do not match those evoked by “México”? What does it say about our place of enunciation if, for instance, we were to align minimalism and concept with the former, while aligning *horror vacui* and object with the latter?

Aira does not offer a solution to this new set of contradictions, espousing neither nativism nor exoticism. Instead, he exacerbates them not just by poking at the bad conscience of the affluent tourist but by constructing a book-project capable of showing by contrast how souvenirs estrange us from our memories (when they are supposed to bring them back to life) and from other human beings as well (when they are supposed to “connect” us with them). “Duchamp en México” thus outwits an unabashedly commodifying rendering of México –think of travel agency brochures– with its quest for a primeval bargain. As the protagonist fails in this endeavor, his melancholia deepens. While he dwells on the symptoms of consumerism, we look with renewed estrangement at a narration that insinuates itself as an ampoule filled with Mexican air.

Furthermore, Aira also heightens the contradictions between nativism and exoticism by presenting an ubiquitous coffee-table book on Duchamp –“in real life” likely to be published by Taschen or Könemann– as more representative of contemporary Mexican readership than those books and crafts intended for the tourist, thus pointing at the gap between culture and local color. Likewise, it is as if Aira stung Fuentes’s tie again with the provocative gesture of being an Argentine who writes “about” Mexico, to the dismay of the identitarian-mimetic discourse that rules in the

re-nationalized panorama of Latin American literature in the nineties, and flirts with orientaling Mexico from the privileged exoticizing position of the Argentine tourist.³²

The trace that Duchamp's "Trap" (1917) leaves on the text provides the third point necessary to triangulate Aira's peculiar form of ideology critique [Fig. 5]. The ready-made, more commonly known by its French name "Trébuchet" because of its allusions to both an endgame in chess and to a military device that resembles a catapult, is known in Spanish as "la Trampa," which is the name that the narrator gives to the odd phenomenon of his "captivity" in México and a suitable nickname for the literary procedure that keeps the reader's attention on the plot. Duchamp recalls the piece as a "real coat hanger that I wanted someone to put on the wall and hang my things on but I never did come to that –so it was on the floor and I would kick it every minute, every time I went out –I got crazy about it and I said the Hell with it, if it wants to stay there and bore me, I'll nail it down" (qtd. in Molesworth 56). Would it be unfair to describe this line of thought as Aira *avant la lettre*?

Why, if the coat hanger made him so crazy, did he not take the reasonable precaution of nailing it on the wall, where it belonged? And how is this "art," if he did not really *do* anything? (Duchamp's answer to this last question would be that it is *not* art, precisely.) We could linger in puzzlement for a long time, for the work is true to its name both in making us trip with our thoughts and catapult them ahead. In addition, Duchamp anticipates conceptualism by dodging any otherwise reasonable expectation that explanation on the part of the artist is not *part of the work* but something that precedes and supersedes it. Neither is it something that brings the work to a closure

³² Aira constantly makes playful, even caustic interventions beyond Argentine literature. A case in point is the novel *Varamo* (2002), whose title sounds, when pronounced with a Caribbean accent that omits the 's' sound at the end of words, like "varamos," "we've run aground." The title accompanies the defeatism implicit in the plot, where the protagonist writes the masterpiece of Panamenian literature in *one night*. I thank Julio Premat for bringing this text to my attention.

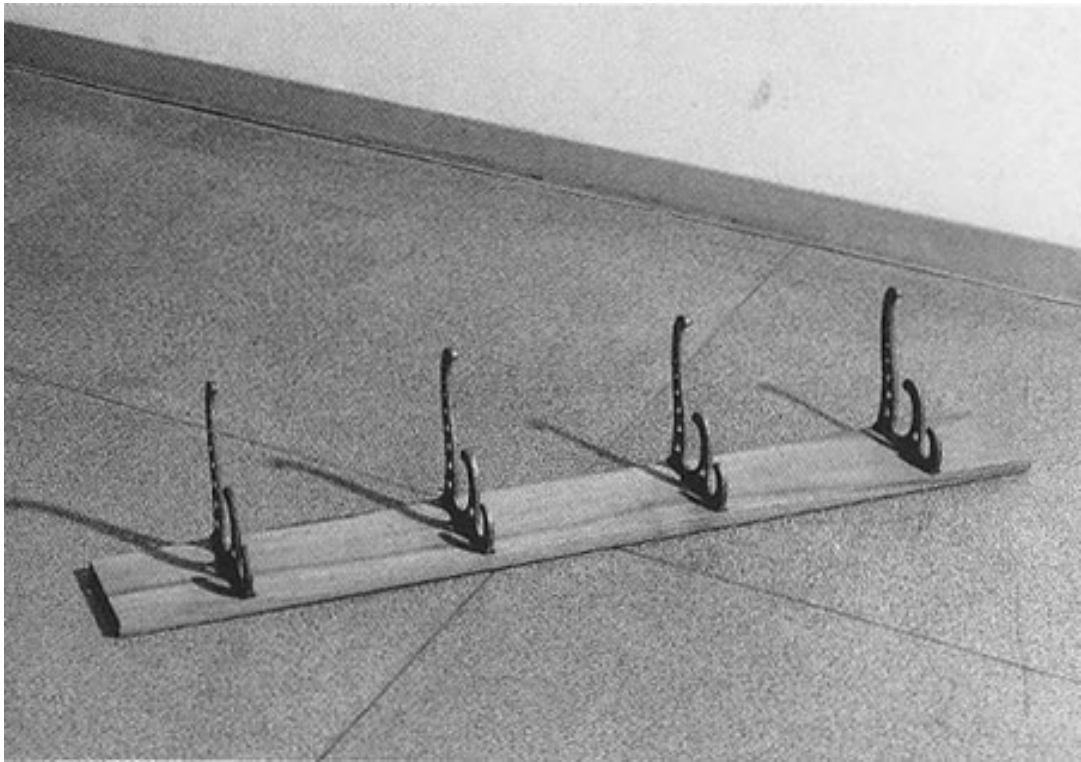


Figure 5: Trap. 1917. Schwarz 301.

(“what I *really* meant to say is that...”), but rather the beginning of a new cycle of speculation.

“Duchamp en México” does to narrative space something similar to what *Trébuchet* does to a room: when you walk towards a coat hanger that is nailed to the floor you get the impression that you are climbing a wall; while reading Aira you have the impression of being thrust forward by the hellish narrative tempo, yet “remain still” in the sense that not much has happened at the level of the plot. Moreover, while *Trébuchet* marks an object that plays an important part in a daily ritual of separation of the public and the private –you hang the coat to signal that you are home, where work is supposed to end– Aira’s *trampa* stands as a threshold between the idea that there is no escape from work at all and offering the cure which will end labor once and for all. If Duchamp exposes how leisure becomes maintenance labor, that is, a necessary link in the chain that makes it possible for modern life to revolve around work, couldn’t we claim that Aira exposes tourism inasmuch as it constitutes a privileged form of maintenance labor in a globalized economy, where life revolves around market exchange?

As we can see, in Aira there is a displaced continuation of the project of Duchamp, rather than a metaphoric invocation of the artist’s works.³³ In this sense, Aira offers a metonymic turn of the screw of the ideal of the “perverse Taylorist.” The term is used in regards to Duchamp in a study by Helen Molesworth, who claims that *Trébuchet* celebrates the interruption of work by hijacking the rationality of scientific management. Named after its founder Frederick Taylor (1856-1915), Taylorism was one of the leading doctrines of its time, with enormous influence on the configuration and operations of both the workplace and the household, which it sought to make more straightforward and efficient. Duchamp’s peculiar subversion of Taylorism involves

³³ Reber aptly describes Aira as a “champion of metonym and a foe of metaphor” (372).

following its principles in order to disrupt them. Whereas the Taylorist would make sure that the coat hanger is within arm's reach once one goes through the door, yet not so close as to obstruct the door's movement, Duchamp "calculates" the most encumbering spot to plant the hanger and does so.

Aira does the same both in regards to legibility and to neoliberalism; we may rightly call him a "perverse neoliberal." At face value, Aira's writings present a highly legible prose of the airport bookstore, a rushed, easy-reading kind, yet upon further consideration it becomes obscure. Aira both seduces and deceives the reader who expects the rewards of intrigue and information-value; in this sense his plots can be seen as a calculated subversion of the resources of an instructive and properly formulaic page-turner best-seller like *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), which, incidentally, reinforces the traditional image of art history that Duchamp challenged.³⁴

Neoliberalism trips against the obstacles set by Aira like Taylorism tripped against those set by Duchamp. If we follow David Harvey in understanding neoliberalism as "the doctrine that market exchange is an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide for all human action," then we can appreciate how Aira's own ethic obeys and distorts a similar rationality. What guides Aira's characters but exacerbated exchange in an estranged marketplace? Contreras observes that Aira follows "una estricta ética de la invención," in other words, an ethics where anything goes as long as it is new (2006: 20). Innovation is of course crucial for the so-called information economy, except so are the categories that make this information comprehensible and reproducible. Aira's prose systematically debunks such categories in a gesture which parallels Duchamp's adopting the principles of Taylorism to subvert them.

Harvey has also famously argued that a characteristic feature of the mobility and internationalization of capital inherent to globalization is a heightened sense of "time-

³⁴ Aira presents a playful theory of the best-seller in "Best-Seller y literatura."

space compression,” where space becomes negligible and the experience of time is accelerated (1990). In a rather literal rendering of this metaphor, Aira constantly packs together narrative time and space, as in the denouement of a passage cited above:

Y si lo que tiene para ofrecer un país es la vida regalada de sus playas, basta con hacer a escala reducida una representación del tiempo. Un cortocircuito sumamente práctico es miniaturizar el valor de la moneda. Con dinero de Liliput aun los turistas pobres como yo están en condiciones de comprar todas las miniaturas que se les antojen, y hasta algunas más para llevar de regalo. (30-31; my emphasis)

[And if what a country has to offer is the giveaway life of its beaches, it suffices to make a reduced-scale representation of time. An extremely practical shortcircuit is to miniaturize the value of the currency. With Liliput money even poor tourists like me are in condition to buy every miniature they fancy, and even some more to take as gifts.]

Here is an image of currency devaluation as state-sponsored theft, something which would relate to a reading of “Paris Air” as primitive accumulation of a natural resource (analogous to fencing communal property). Likewise, we can identify “representación del tiempo” with expropriated labor and the final ironical celebration of consumerism as an act of pointing fingers at the car that pulls the engine of contemporary capitalism. However, this must remain a tentative interpretation, for as suggestive as the passage may be, the burden of the proof falls on the word “cortocircuito,” short circuit, which stands for the disruptive moment of Airean gesture, both inviting theorization and in this case foreclosing the possibility of arriving to a sound conclusion.

Market exchange is the driving force behind the shopping spree of the protagonist of “Duchamp en México.” The backdrop for the nagging insistence that a sudden increase in his buying power orients his quest has to do with the contrasting economic situations of México and Argentina. While the former was going through the dire years of post-NAFTA devaluation, the latter was in the heyday of “Ley de

Convertibilidad,” which established by decree that one peso would equal one dollar (Cardim).³⁵ In other words, empowered by a strong currency, the Argentine tourist could roam the world like never before –unaware of course of the resounding collapse of free-market optimism that would take place in 2001. Thus, the flipside of Aira’s expedition to México would be a “successful” shopping spree.

In this sense the text bridges the gap between macroeconomic narrative and the personal experience of consumption. The global financial system defines the course of society, yet one does not tend to associate it with everyday life –or with art, for that matter. Aira’s compulsive, self-destructive “financial” speculation would ground this otherwise abstract machine while criticizing from within the place that the literary, conditioned by the book’s regime of circulation, has within global cultural exchange.

Trébuchet marks an object that plays an important part in a daily ritual of separation of the public and the private: you hang the coat to signal that you are home, where work is supposed to end. In this manner Duchamp exposes how under Taylorism leisure becomes maintenance labor, that is, a necessary link in the chain that makes possible for modern life to revolve around work –as opposed to subsistence or to leisure itself (Molesworth 57). Recalling the terms of Bauman’s discussion, one could claim that Aira exposes tourism inasmuch as it constitutes a privileged form of maintenance labor in a globalized economy, where life revolves around market exchange. This would account for the juxtaposition of the souvenir, the art-object, and the book.

In sum, “Duchamp en México” offers conceptualist strategies of institutional critique that appear both displaced and continued, macroeconomic narratives articulated with subjective experience, an aporetic exploration of the subject/object

³⁵ The Mexican financial crisis of 1994/1995 made the Argentine model stumble, but readjustments made it endure until *el Corralito* (Gil Díaz).

divide in globalization, and an unresolved tension between creation and commercialism. This is best understood not in terms of influence or evocation, but in terms of effect: Aira's "trampa" encapsulates like "Paris Air," collects and devaluates like "Box in a Valise," and makes one stumble like "Trébuchet." The narration, or properly the almost complete lack thereof, draws idiosyncratically and simultaneously from at least these three works by Duchamp.

Such borrowings from contemporary art displace the spirit of institutional critique into ideology critique in the sense that they turn the ideal of a work of art that can transform the operations of a museum, into the ideal of a fantastic commodity that can transform the ensemble of consumer culture. Dierdra Reber expounds an argument along similar lines in an article that discusses the motif of fantastic consumption from a perspective that is not informed by contemporary art but by affect studies. Reber points out in relation to *Un sueño realizado* (2001) something that is also true for "Duchamp en México": Aira speaks from *within* global market culture, that is, from within consumerism (395). The narrator openly espouses the idea: "el consumismo es una parte de nuestro destino [consumerism is one part of our fate]" (19). But what part of "our fate" *is not* enveloped by consumerism? Is Aira's unpredictable narration an antidote of sorts to the determinism inflicted upon us by market forces?

Building on Graciela Montaldo's work, Reber claims that the sheer unproductivity of Aira's works has a radical value, for "their mental activity mimics the logical process of a productive subject, but instead establishes a committed and rational engagement with unproductivity" (380). Thus, in playing with minds set to consumerism, Aira's tales open a gap from where one may begin to overcome its inner workings. "Duchamp en México" would be a case in point, and further analysis could be made along the lines of the articulation of psyche and social dynamics that Reber draws from Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*. To the question then about which

part of our fate is not enveloped by consumerism, the answer is “art.” The answer is “Duchamp,” but Duchamp unbound: the frailness of the ready-made and not its institutionalized place in the historiography of Western Art. Duchamp beyond the covers of the coffee table book, representing art “on the very verge of not being,” as Aira would describe Copi. Alas, Duchamp in Mexico.

Finally, the question becomes: can nonsense disrupt the meaningless drive towards consumerist satisfaction? In the novel’s language: is there any chance that the “maqueta de implosión” led to an actual collapse? The protagonist constantly yearns for reality, an indication of which is the closing statement in which he wishes that, for the future novelist who would take up the cause of the project-novel, “la realidad por fin se hiciera real.” However, he also offers a humorous and vaguely disparaging representation of speculative thought:

La práctica, como lo sabe cualquier marxista, requiere salir de la autointerlocución. Es decir que debería ver por el otro lado, por la “espalda”, a mi depresión, a mi pesimismo, como un bailarín obeso que se hiciera filmar para poder verse, con la inútil esperanza de mejorar su técnica. (20)

[Practice, as any Marxist knows, requires leaving self-interlocution. That is, I should look my depression, my pessimism, through the other side, through the “back,” as an obese dancer that had himself filmed to be able to see himself, with the useless hope of improving his technique.]

One suspects that the image of the novelist as an obese dancer does an ill-favor to that of the reader and potential writer –who in the metaphor would stand for the camera, perhaps? The passage is exemplarily obscure, for we remain clueless as to what exactly is the function of “es decir.” Yet, at the same time, it is also highly legible in the sense that syntax, tempo and pun all compel the reader to read on. If it

were at all to call to political action it would do so à la Duchamp, whose unproductive devices transcend their time.

Unhealing the Dead Hare

What if the souvenir came back to haunt the tourist? What if the invested token of travel through faraway lands became an animated object and came to greet us? In a flash, let the following image from the near past come to bear upon the present:

Gabriel García Márquez, dressed in white, wearing a regional dress by the name of liqui liqui, traveling to Stockholm to receive the 1982 Nobel prize and seal a long-lasting pact that would enshrine magical realism as a dominant figure to represent and understand Latin America, if not the Third World as a whole.³⁶ [Fig. 6] Fast forward now to the year 2003, when Mario Bellatin orchestrates the following presentation at the Instituto de México in Paris, the city that Pascale Casanova has famously characterized as the capital of the world republic of letters.

A public servant, an artist, a dancer, and a theater director impersonate four prominent living Mexican authors and interact with the audience in a variety of ways without ever abandoning their assigned roles. Two women represent Salvador Elizondo and Sergio Pitol, while two men represent Margo Glantz and José Agustín. Over the course of a few months, each of the authors helps their “doubles” to prepare for their task in such a way that they could reproduce their every gesture and become acquainted with their lives’ work. Along with texts by the authors, who reflect upon their participation, a detailed documentation of the preparation for the performance, but not of the performance itself, appeared in a Spanish-French bilingual volume

³⁶ See Hoyos, Héctor. “El liqui liqui nuevo del emperador: el episodio del Nobel de García Márquez,” forthcoming.



Figure 6: García Márquez in Stockholm. Nobel Prize Award Ceremony, 1982. 2 Jan. 2008. <http://vidanueva.hdnweb.com/uploaded_pictures/64_1.jpg>

entitled *Escritores duplicados: narradores mexicanos en París/Doubles d'écrivains: Narrateurs mexicains à Paris* (2003). [Fig. 7]

This fundamental book reveals some of the concerns of the work of Mario Bellatin: the relationship between intimacy and public exposure, the status of the book-object, the embeddedness of literature within a wider set of more or less ritualized practices, the place of the Latin American author in the world. Although the Paris performance appears desacralizing as compared to the iconic moment in Stockholm –or to award ceremonies in general, as well as to more modest related events such as book presentations and signings– in fact Bellatin's work alternates between seeking to restore a sacred dimension to literature, and, on the contrary, exposing it as utterly mundane.³⁷ *Escritores duplicados* also exemplifies two of the main traits of contemporary art that Bellatin sets in motion: institutional critique through performance and the appeal to *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Joseph Beuys enhanced institutional critique by changing its emphasis from objects to actions, arriving to a particular take on the notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. This concept had an interesting cultural history long before surfacing, transformed, in either Beuys or Bellatin's works. It literally means integrated, complete, or whole art, although it is also translated as "synthetic art." Richard Wagner coined the term to describe his understanding of the role and form that opera should have in the wake of the failed Revolution of 1848: by integrating music, theater, and the visual arts, his opera was to move the spectator into social change (Germer 72). Although Wagner would increasingly grow skeptical about the political potential of whole art, Beuys recuperated it, transformed, through the notion of "social sculpture," the intuition that

³⁷ Whereas Goldchluk has shown how Bellatin can be regarded as "el animal sagrado de la tribu," the author states in an interview that writers must be able to manipulate a text as if with Photoshop, because it is a myth that texts are sacred, "que no se pueden tocar porque está en juego tu vida." (Frieria).

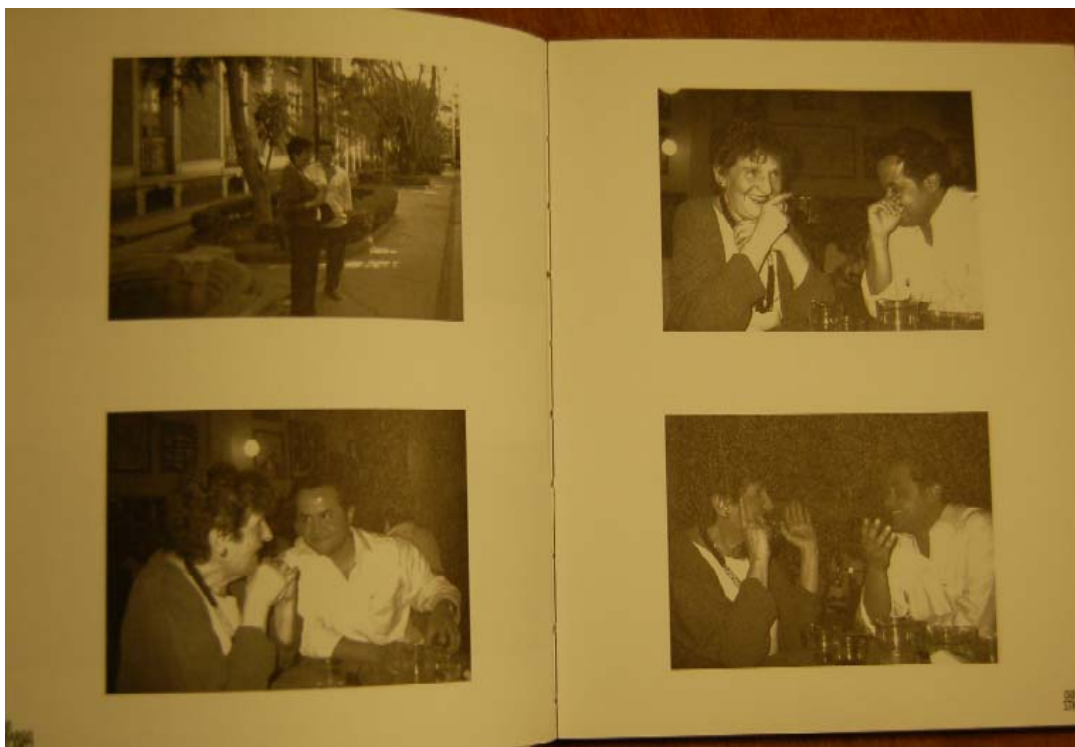


Figure 7: Escritores duplicados: Gabriel Martínez studies Margo Glantz's portrait and prepares his impersonation. México, 2003. Bellatin et al. 10-11; 50-51.

“by inventing social conditions instead of analyzing them, you can contribute to their change” (66).

The line that serves as an epigraph to this chapter, “I cannot and should not let myself be made into a possible art object,” attests to the potency of social sculpture. It is a spontaneous declaration by a government functionary in response to the question of why he would not go to Düsseldorf to meet Beuys in person (1972). Beuys had occupied part of the university with his students, who protested against the government’s decision of expelling him from his teaching position. When police came to forcibly remove them from the premises, Beuys “sculpted” a moment that is captured in a famous picture that shows the smiling, unemployed professor walking past the representatives of the Law. The image made it to the newspapers and moved the public opinion of its time, and speaks volumes even today [Fig. 8]. Note the caption: *Demokratie ist lustig*, Democracy is funny.

Whereas under the light of the praxis of social sculpture one can readily appreciate how Bellatin’s intervention in Paris may transform the reception of Mexican literature among a determinate crowd of Parisians, and, presumably, among expatriates and members of the international diplomatic community stationed there, it is only upon considering a broader sample of Bellatin’s own social sculptures that we may discern certain trends. During a lecture tour that included Cornell and Harvard in October 2002, Bellatin caught everybody by surprise by bringing along a tape recorder and setting it on the podium. He then played a recording prepared for the occasion and waited until “his voice” finished delivering the conference, at which point he stood up to take questions from the audience.³⁸

It would be a difficult task to reconstruct the trains of thought brought about by this gesture in its original context. One could have seen it, say, as a reflection on the

³⁸ I am indebted to Edmundo Paz-Soldán for bringing this event to my attention.

role of technology in modern life, or as a critique of the fetishization of the presence of the author. Perhaps, given the academic setting, the performance would resonate with particular readings and appear, for instance, as a commentary on Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?," or as an enactment of Derrida's notion of "otobiography." Be it as it may, Bellatin's unabashedly ambiguous acts stand as the substrate for speculation, eliciting both interaction and open-ended interpretation. Their site-specificity and evocative power illustrate how the author assimilates one of the central goals of Beuys's project: "to be a medium for issuing forth symbolism of uncontested potency yet non-definable meaning" (Thistlewood 16).

What are the particularities of the "Beuysian way" of "being a medium for symbolism"? By way of metaphorical elucidation, one may further characterize Beuys's project, inasmuch as it percolates into Bellatin's, by comparing it to magma. As molten rock that constantly solidifies and liquefies, the elements in his work are in a state of permanent recombination accompanied by a gradual incorporation of new elements. Striving towards the ultimate ambition of establishing art and life as parts of an organic whole (and taking distance from Wagner by doing so), Beuys aims for fluidity between the material and the conceptual, between action and material relic, between the single work and the work as a whole, and between autobiographical mythology and the work of art.

The result then is a fluid "medium for symbolism" that goes beyond emphasizing process over product into investing process with a properly mythical dimension as a potential matrix for personal and social change. Bellatin transforms this matrix by giving it continuation within his work, as if "feeding" Beuysian magma, simultaneously evoking specific elements from Beuys's works and submitting a new set of concerns to its transformative fire. If Beuys's work is a medium for issuing forth

Galerie Friedrichs



Joseph Bering

Figure 8: Demokratie ist lustig. 1973. Galerie Friedrichs, Kranenburg. 2 Jan. 2008.

<http://www.extralot.com/show_image.php?item=30097&partner=2&skript=/description.php>

symbolism, Bellatin utilizes this medium without necessarily preserving its original symbols. Thus, whereas Bellatin actualizes Beuys by adopting some of his motifs, he does so more significantly by embodying his procedure and taking it in unforeseen directions. In this sense, we must make note not only of what Bellatin draws from the Beuysian legacy, but also of how he is “unfaithful” to it.

Bellatin deploys such principles in *Lecciones para una liebre muerta* (2005), which is composed of a myriad of sometimes more and sometimes less developed narrative structures that appear dispersed throughout 243 aphoristic entries. Attempting to connect the dots in any conventional way frequently leads to aporia: certain passages appear isolated from the rest of the book, although they in fact reelaborate motifs from other works by the author; other passages compose lengthy if constantly interrupted storylines that run parallel to each other and yet occasionally intersect in understated or abrupt ways. One of the more developed storylines involves a character that is based on one of the “duplicated” writers of the Paris performance. Consider the following aphorism, where Bellatin offers a narrative elaboration of events that have taken place “in real life”:

Pero no. La experiencia de clonación llevada a cabo por mario bellatin [sic] para la galería de arte no podía ser más que un juego, pensó margo glantz. Sin embargo allí estaba. Acostada en su cama al amanecer, convertida en un futuro abogado. (§115)

[But no. The cloning experience carried out by mario bellatin for the art gallery could not be more than a game, thought margo glantz. However there she was. Laying on her bed at dawn, turned into an aspiring lawyer.]

The opening adversative clause, which accentuates the fragmentary character of a narration that is already fragmented, readily gives way to a disjointed storyline that rearranges the elements of Bellatin’s ongoing synthetic artistic-literary practice and

parodies Kafka. This passage exemplifies Beuysian magma-like fluidity between action and material relic, in the sense that it is anteceded by the performance itself and by *Escritores duplicados*, the first in a series of “relics” of that performance. In Beuys, such a continuity is of course more sculptural in nature, as it encompasses the strictly ephemeral and also its physical remnants, which later become invested objects, witnesses of sorts.

The same principle informs the transaction between the performance “Homogeneous Infiltration for Grand Piano, the Greatest Contemporary Composer is the Thalidomide Child” (1966), and its various material relics. Whereas the performance involved a unique moment of irruption of a concert –the *coup de silence* of Beuys occupying the stage by introducing a grand piano wrapped in felt– the primary relic of the event, that is, the intervened piano, stands as a residue, as a reminder, *and* as a sculpture in its own right [Fig. 9]. The afterlife of the performance carries on, however, in “The Skin” (1984), where the artist had the original felt wrapping changed due to its deterioration and then had the wrapping exhibited as an “independent” piece that Caroline Tisdall fittingly compares to “an elephant skin” [Fig. 10].

A similar relationship between performance and relic informs Bellatin’s work at various levels. Singularity and repetition lie in creative tension throughout, leading to a certain “transformation within sameness” prevalent in the author’s work. This can be appreciated in a structural sense, for in *Lecciones* the relations between episodes and the ensemble of the book mimic those that take place between the book and the work seen as a continuum. Laddaga and Palaversich have characterized this continuum in different terms; for the former, Bellatin’s textuality is a “navigatable space” comparable to the Internet, while for the latter intertextual references among Bellatin’s works obey to an internal logic that postulate the oeuvre as a world in itself, analogous



Figure 9: Homogeneous Infiltration For Grand Piano, The Greatest Contemporary
Composer is the Thalidomide Child. 1966. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris. 2
 Jan. 2008. <http://pds1.egloos.com/pds/1/200605/30/64/c0035864_130205.jpg>



Figure 10: The Skin. 1984. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris. 2 Jan. 2008.
 <http://pds1.egloos.com/pds/1/200605/30/64/c0035864_1351548.jpg>

to *nouveau roman* and to Barthesian “writerly” prose. While these views are accurate, the specificity of Bellatin’s continuum is best appreciated at the crossroads of the fluidity between action and relic and the fluidity between the singular work and the oeuvre.

The sequence of works that revolve around “Homogeneous Infiltration for Grand Piano” also speaks to Bellatin’s process in another sense, for it provides meaningful motifs that the writer reelaborates in unique ways. The book shares with Beuysian performances a peculiar alternation of solemnity, eeriness and a sense of ridicule. Bellatin’s tone is just as magisterial when he narrates something farcical, such as Bruce Lee taking up the trade of shoemaking (§76) –and here one is reminded of Beuys’s sternness when later on in the performance he “sets free” a quacking, wing-fluttering toy duck– as when he recounts unsettling stories about a prosthetic hand that has a short circuit and begins to crush its bearer’s healthy hand (§132). The turn to the unsettling was consummated in Beuys’s performance in various ways, for apart from the already disturbing presence of the muted piano, he wrote up on two blackboards words that give an additional layer of meaning to “Infiltration” and upon which Bellatin elaborates:

IN THE ROOM OF THE
THALIDOMIDE CHILD
PENETRATED
DOES THE MUSIC OF THE PAST
HELP HIM??
???

SUFFERING
WARMTH
SOUND
PLASTICITY (Schneede 112)

Thalidomide was far from being a mere cultural referent for the audience of the performance, but a familiar and painful reality: between 1956 and 1962 this sedative, hypnotic drug was prescribed for nausea during pregnancy, causing severe malformations in newborns around the world. Taking this history into account, one may appreciate how the muted piano evokes impossibility of movement, limited human potential, missing limbs. In German, the word for grand piano is *Flügel*, that is, “wing”: the closed piano lid attests to a lost opportunity for “flight,” something that the presence of the duck reinforces through pathetism. Although elaborating every aspect of this complex work exceeds our current purposes, we can appreciate how a constant transformation of the motif of the thalidomide child is one of the driving forces of Bellatin’s work.³⁹

How is the thalidomide child the greatest contemporary composer? And how is this theme actualized by Bellatin? A partial answer for the case of Beuys involves a distinct artistic rationale and a form of social criticism. Indeed, “suffering, warmth, sound, and plasticity” are basic pigments of the Beuysian conceptual palette, and Beuys posits the “dissonance” of contemporary music not as an aberration, but as a mirror image of society. In this sense, the thalidomide child becomes not a monster, but something that de-monstrates, or exposes, the truth about society –specifically, a darker side of baby boom optimism.⁴⁰ Bellatin’s reelaborations of the motif of the thalidomide child are also indicative of a Beuysian *ars poetica*; likewise, they offer sites for a particular form of critique. Just as Beuys’s disquieting performance resists reductionist interpretations that might assimilate it to an ulterior message or morale,

³⁹ Among various other literary representations of the drug’s ill-doings, Sylvia Plath’s 1962 poem “Thalidomide” reflects on the experience of the mother who has been spared from the tragedy: “What glove//What leatheriness/Has protected//Me from that shadow—//The indelible buds” (252). Arguably, echoes of the thalidomide mother make their way into *Lecciones* in the form of the nightclub “the mother,” where certain “perverse and merry” ritual practices take place (§14).

⁴⁰ Derrida explores the relation between the shown and the monster: “Qu’est-ce qu’un monstre?... *Monstrer*, c’est montrer, et une *monstre* est une montre” (1990: 182). See also Cohen.

for instance, that of a patronizing sympathy for the victim, Bellatin's work insistently reelaborates the motif of the thalidomide child in complex ways that resonate with various contemporary discussions.

Allow me to illustrate this in regards to the present status of the coming to be of the global, a concern that was of course also present in the Paris performance, where the bodies of the participating "local" authors were substituted by other bodies at the moment they were to become "global." Interpersed with stories about characters with missing limbs, such as the orphan Kuhn twins, who have no legs and no arms, the reader encounters a storyline about the mysterious transactions that take place between "universales" and the sick people who are secluded in the "ciudadela final":

Los universales que permanecieron en el campo no fueron seleccionados para ser recludos en la ciudadela final. Deberían por eso seguir acercándose por las noches a la alambrada e insistir en el intercambio de sangre por drogas. De alguna manera esta escena me hace recordar a ciertos trabajos del artista joseph beuys, especialmente los realizados en tiempos de la posguerra. (§151)

[The universals that remained in the country were not chosen to be confined in the final city. For that reason, they had to keep approaching the wire fencing at night and insist on exchanging blood for drugs. In some way, this scene makes me remember certain works by the artist joseph beuys, specially those done in postwar times.]

While the imagery vaguely resembles that of the post-apocalyptic tribes in films like *Mad Max* (1979), it also contributes to a narrative arch that poetically explores pointed contradictions of the present: the universals, who roam freely across the territory, offer drugs in exchange for the poisoned blood of prisoners/patients who are, paradoxically, better off than they are. Could we not see this passage also under the light of the current tensions between the global and the local? Indeed, the scene summons the terms of Bauman's argument. Moreover, it subverts the logic of the

commerce of drugs such as cocaine, which, unlike thalidomide back in the day, is *illegally* produced by local underpaid labor yet gets consumed by global markets. Bellatin thus overdetermines the symbol of the fence (“la alambrada”), as it represents the limits of law and country, yet stands as the mirror where the tourist and the vagabond stare at each other face to face, and is also a membrane through which *infiltration* takes place. This last point is of course the key to appreciating how the passage is reminiscent of Beuys: the fence evokes the role that felt had in the performance, that of being warm and enveloping but also unbearably asphyxiating, at the same time womb-like and tomb-like.

The richness of a passage such as this one is underscored by the ways in which it constellates with other moments within and beyond *Lecciones*, as well as by the care that Bellatin puts into avoiding falling neatly within the registers of the various genres he touches upon, such as science fiction or confessional writing. One may read in this constellation an original literary take on a central aspect of contemporary times: the experience of dislocation. Bellatin responds to the challenge of how to narrate this phenomenon without turning it into something abstract and without placing the reader at an overtly safe distance from it; Beuys faced a similar challenge in regards to the thalidomide child. Bellatin explores dislocation from a variety of perspectives (perhaps one cannot do so otherwise) that include an extensive reflection about the body, an enquiry about the persona of the writer, and a peculiar articulation of cultural referents that originate in different parts of the world and that may very well belong to high culture or to popular culture.

Indeed, in many of Bellatin’s stories the globalization predicament of “your body is in one place, but your mind is somewhere else” becomes almost literal, and a lost sense of home is figured, again literally, as “a missing part of oneself.” Hence, one finds a presumably autobiographical storyline in *Lecciones* that narrates the itinerant

movements of a Latin American writer on his way to a writer's residency in New York State, or, throughout Bellatin's work, various transmutations of the figure of the writer. Such events are related to the transactions between universals and patients, or between readers and writers, as they are to the frequent mention of missing limbs and their prosthetic substitutions. As the book does not spell out the terms of such relations, we have yet another instance of Beuysian "uncontested potency with non definable meaning." Despite this vagueness, or perhaps through it, the text conveys a sense of dislocation and sets the stage for the reader's reflection. At the same time, it defines the scope of this reflection, at least inasmuch as it binds various forms of deprivation to the practice of literature and most specifically to the role that actual bodies play in it.

The first "actual body" to come to the foreground is the author's. As the majority of his readers presumably know, Mario Bellatin writes from personal knowledge about the experience of missing limbs: he has a prosthetic hand. [Fig. 11] Hence, when his books mention an unruly prosthetic hand by the name "Otto Bock," which is in real life the name of a company that manufactures such devices, the author's own prothesis is the referent. However, the reference is straightforward only at first glance; it is a point of entry into Bellatin's poetics more than an end in itself. As we have seen, the author articulates autobiographical mythology with reflections about major issues of our time, some of which are the constitution of the global and the place of (Latin American) literature within it. Thus, the "incomplete" bodies of Bellatin's work may be *both* representations of a fractured experience of the world and experiments in extimacy. The nature of such articulation is profoundly Beuysian, and yet it exceeds a certain frame of make-believe on which Beuys relies, as well as the sacrificial horizon that goes along with it. If Beuys had the audience fancy itself as the thalidomide child in order to articulate social criticism with empathy for the victim, Bellatin forecloses



Figure 11: Mario Bellatin. Taller Regional de Literatura CIELA Fraguas.

Aguascalientes, November 2007. 2 Jan. 2008

<<http://www.flickr.com/photos/64635550@N00>>

the possibility of identification and manipulates empathy among other things in order to offer an actualized take on social criticism.⁴¹

Talk about the fluidity between art and life: Bellatin is the thalidomide child as an adult. The potency of lived experience is, also, transformed by magma. Its asymmetrical correlate in Beuys's work are anecdotes/keys such as how, as a result of an aeronautical accident while serving in the Luftwaffe during World War II, Beuys had a metal plate inserted in his skull (Thistlewood). This would make him cover his head so that the plate would not heat up under the sun, which in turn led to his adoption of the emblematic felt hat that became part of his signature as an artist. Whereas the hat is a sign of penitence for having complied with Nazism, and along such lines various performances from the post-war years serve as collective ceremonies of reconciliation, Bellatin's poetic elaboration of his "birthmark" does not subject history to a sacrificial order.⁴²

There is another performance by Beuys that leaves a trace in Bellatin's text: "How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare" (1965) [Fig. 12]. Just as the lower caps of proper names (margo glantz, mario bellatin) question the transparency of referentiality in the author's work, the title of the book almost bears the name of Beuys's performance, yet alludes to it in opaque ways. The performance is an act of healing, where the artist, his

⁴¹ "El traductor afirmaba que para los mellizos kuhn fue una suerte de bendición no tener brazos ni piernas. De haber nacido completos quizá no serían sino una cifra más entre la de tantos niños abandonados por sus padres. La falta de extremidades fue lo que llamó la atención. Periodistas de varios diarios hicieron una serie de reportajes apenas fueron hallados por el pescador en los acantilados. Después también siguieron atrayendo la curiosidad. Cuando se creó el día del niño o cuando se organizaba alguna colecta para criaturas necesitadas, casi siempre era la imagen de los mellizos kuhn el símbolo de las campañas" (§124).

⁴² "What begins [in Beuys] with symbolic healing of personal compliance with Nazism thus has ambitions to restore German cultural identity with Modernism. Reconciliation with Modernism becomes an act of national reparation –impossible to effect in other than symbolic terms" (Thistlewood 5). Among other passages that may signal Bellatin's parting ways with the Christic side of Beuys's endeavors, consider §17: "En esos días unos campesinos me obsequiarun un perro al que bauticé como jesús, cosa que desagradó mucho a la esposa del austriaco. El caso fue que cierto amanecer, después de haber pasado despierto toda la noche, me levanté de la cama y salí de aquella cabaña sin despedirme siquiera del perro."

head covered in honey and gold leaf, lovingly walks the animal through the gallery and lets it “touch the pictures with its paws” (Goldberg 96). Bellatin’s book, on the contrary, is sickening, and purposefully so, as it stages lengthy explorations of subtle forms of submission.

While in the transference of the action of *Escritores Duplicados* into fiction the figure of Margo Glantz gains a Kafkaian allure, the transference of Beuys’s performance into *Lecciones* entails a subtraction in the horizon of the performance. Whereas the sadistic was already present in Beuys’s acts of exhibition –presumably, the hare did not die from old age– Bellatin largely bypasses its dialectical relation with tenderness and consolidates a rather grim vision of humanity, where a character (“la hermana literata”) adopts a child only to later become bored by her disinterest in reading and takes her back to the orphanage (§33), or where a father tells gruesome bedtime stories about deadly accidents to his unsuspecting toddler (§180), among many other possible examples. These are not “Lecciones de arte para una liebre muerta,” as Beuys’s performance is known in Spanish, but “lecciones” in the most punitive overtones of the expression “dar una lección”: to discipline, to restrain, to reprimand.

If in effect Bellatin takes away the sacrificial horizon from Beuys, or at least diminishes the redeeming value that the artist attributes to suffering, he also adds to Beuys an entirely new horizon by subjecting a different set of cultural referents to its logic of ongoing transformation. What a passage of *Lecciones* dubs as the “método mariótico” (§81), or “Mario’s method” is alas not identical to Beuysian magma, not only because it involves different elements, but also because it strives less for amalgamation than for a heightened sense of creative tension between its elements:



Figure 12: How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare. 1965. Photo by Walter Vogel.

Schneede 111.

Hasta el día de hoy escucho las palabras de mi abuelo diciéndome que, sentado bajo el póster de bruce lee, el maestro espín sacó un lápiz y un papel. Empezó a trazar los últimos movimientos de la vida de macaca, desde el estreno de la película hasta el despido del último jardinero. Se agachó mucho sobre la hoja. El maestro espín usaba todo el tiempo un sombrero de fieltro negro. En mis recuerdos mi abuelo se refería a ese sombrero en forma recurrente. (§86)

[Until today I listen to the words of my grandfather telling me that, sitting under the poster of bruce lee, master espín took out a pencil and a paper. He began to sketch the last movements of macaca's life, from the premier of the film until the last gardener was fired. He bent down over the paper a lot. Master espín used a black felt hat all the time. In my memories, my grandfather referred to that hat repeatedly.]

Whereas the felt hat betrays Joseph Beuys transfigured in the character “maestro espín” –espín for “espina,” thorn,— its proximity to the famous martial artist is all the more striking when one takes into account that by this point *Lecciones* has associated the figure of the grandfather with that of José María Arguedas (1911-1969), the classic Peruvian novelist and anthropologist. Are these cultural referents not from completely different realms of culture, the kind one is inclined to say are “worlds apart”? Indeed, regardless of whether the reader knows or not who these characters are loosely based upon, there is an additional layer of uncanniness in Bellatin's writing that results from, as it were, pitting against each other the cultural fields associated with such figures.

Could one learn about Beuys through Arguedas? *Lecciones* does not answer the question, or even openly pose it; instead, over the course of many entries the grandfather recounts baffling anecdotes to the narrator, such as how espín got expelled from his position as a primary teacher “in the Quechua-speaking regions” by using his students as guinea pigs in pedagogic experiments that ultimately led him to do all their homework, and left the students not to learn a thing. Could one assimilate visually or even culturally, as other entries imply, the dance of a “danzante de tijeras,” Arguedas'

crucial literary motif, to Bruce Lee's stiff-legged acrobatics in the cult film *Enter the Dragon* (1973)? [Figs. 13, 14] Although elaborating on these problems requires further studies, note that Bellatin challenges our understanding of the cultural referents that his Beuys-like process is constantly recombining by asking us to imagine unexpected trajectories in global cultural exchange.

Call it a "cross-exoticization," or, in the spirit of the Beuysian mythology of the chemical process of "infiltration," a process similar to "cross-contamination": something clicks when one realizes that *danzaks* are not only part of Peruvian national cultural patrimony or a living traditional art form, as they are so often regarded, *but also* examples of martial art –in that respect also not unlike capoeira, for instance. Similarly, noting that Arguedas and Beuys were both invested in art forms that emphasized the transformation of lived experience calls for a cosmopolitan re-positioning of the reader/viewer. These new constellations, which are perhaps the pinnacle of the lengthy build up that takes place in Bellatin's atmospheric writing, make commensurable things that we thought belonged under utterly different categories. One could characterize Bellatin's cosmopolitanism by transposing the terms of an argument made by Appiah in the context of exploring the possible connections between the Great Wall of China, the Chrysler Building, and the Sistine Chapel:

One connection [the cosmopolitan wants to reminds us of] –the one neglected in talk of cultural patrimony– is the connection not through identity but despite difference. We can respond to art that is not ours; indeed, we can fully respond to "our" art only if we move beyond thinking of it as ours and start to respond to it as art. (135)

Indeed, Bellatin illustrates how the response to art "that is not ours" can be in itself a creative endeavor. At the same time, he offers a view of such a response that is not conciliatory as Appiah's; negotiating different cultural referents can in some sense

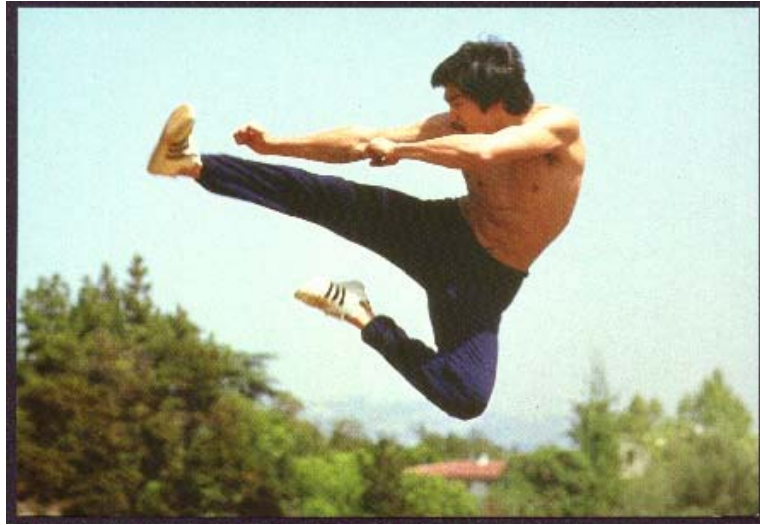


Figure 13: Bruce Lee. 2 Jan.2008 <<http://www.ewmaa.com/images/bruceflying.jpg>>



Figure 14: Danzak (Scissor dancer.) 2 Jan. 2008.

<<http://www.peruredes.com/Folk/imagenes/tijera3.jpg>>

be painful, especially when one deals with specificity and with the rooting of art in lived experience. Bellatin does not “mediate” between cultural legacies, but instead sets the stage for their confrontation, as well as for the reader’s involvement in this process. As the result is more than the sum of its parts, the form of the text is profoundly marked by (inner) struggle.

One could wonder, however, if Bellatin is writing with a certain highly informed audience in mind. Beuys himself was criticized for allegedly creating art for experts and for demanding from his audience absolute allegiance to his aesthetic creed.⁴³ Some of this criticism may carry on to Bellatin, whose hermetism is a recurrent subject among reviewers of contemporary Latin American literature. By the same token, vindications of Beuys apply to Bellatin as well: comprehensibility is foreclosed *both* for the “expert” and for the layperson, in this sense putting them in equal grounds rather than widening the gap between them. The experience of reading Bellatin, as that of regarding Beuys, occurs in a space in which the audience does not have control over meaning, and perhaps neither do the creators. Projects that invoke simultaneously such utterly different cultural realms –later in his life Beuys turned to Celtic folklore– require opacity so as not to become mere cultural theme parks.

It should be noted that, although Beuys provides crucial “materials” that Bellatin enlists in his synthetic practice, the author also relates to local practicing artists in decisive ways. Indeed, Ximena Berecochea (México 1968), the photographer for the image dossier in *Shiki Nagaoka: una nariz de ficción* (2001), and Aldo Chaparro

⁴³ “It is within an interpretative discourse emanating from the artist himself that meaning is assigned. The beholder’s role is thereby restricted to ratifying a Gesamtkunstwerk whose logic of production eludes him, since it stems from the artist’s volition. Beuys’s concept thus required an interpretation that reduced critical commentary to a tautological repetition of his ideas, an interpretation thus incapable of assessing the artist’s claims about the social and political implications of his work” (Germer 73). Palaversich’s reading of Bellatin’s work as a closed universe may have similar problems to the kind of Beuysian criticism that Germer has in mind. A way of overcoming this dilemma is to consider that both creators offer symbolologies that can be articulated into discursive formations different from their own.

(Lima 1965), the photographer for *Perros héroes* (2003, trans. “Hero Dogs” 2006), are to a certain extent co-authors of such volumes. Secondly, although Beuys is an important presence in *Lecciones* and in Bellatin’s overall procedure, one may draw relations with other renowned international artists as well. Duchamp is an obvious first choice given, on the one hand, the title of Bellatin’s most recent publication to date, *El gran vidrio* (2007), and on the other, the complex relationship that Beuys’s work has with Duchamp’s.⁴⁴ Similarly, Laddaga mentions possible relationships to be drawn between Bellatin and Tino Sehgal (Berlin 1976) (130), and one may also call attention to Mel Chin (Houston 1951) and Andrea Fraser (Montana 1965).⁴⁵

At times Bellatin also appeals to installation art in a rather generic, not necessarily Beuysian way. “Hero Dogs,” subtitled “A Look at [Tratado sobre] the Future of Latin America Envisioned as an Immobile Man and His 30 Belgian Malinois Shepherds” consists of loose entries presented as the statement that accompanies a photographic documentation of an installation, in this case one that *stricto sensu* never took place. Texts and images depict oppressive settings peppered with birds of prey, cages, killer dogs, and a trainer who marshals them from his wheel chair. [Fig. 15] Although the “treatise” is far from specifying its “contents,” after being exposed to this stylized representation of household fascism the reader begins to ponder the psychic and social mechanisms that, so to speak, keep the seed of dictatorship alive. Palaversich rightly

⁴⁴ See Beuys’ televised performance *The Silence of Marcel Duchamp is Overrated* (1964) (Adriani, Konnerz, and Thomas 80).

⁴⁵ In the performance “Art must hang” (2001), Fraser reenacted verbatim and with identical gesticulation a speech that the artist Martin Kippenberger had delivered drunk in 1995, an action that resembles Bellatin’s orchestrated authorial substitutions in Paris. See: *Make your Own Life: Artists in and Out of Cologne*. Philadelphia: ICA/University of Pennsylvania, 2006. Whereas the caption of one of the pictures of *Shiki Nagaoka* reported the disapproval of the fictional author’s family towards his decision of embracing religious life, the newspaper clipping that appears in the picture is actually a Japanese ad for the accounting firm Arthur Andersen (Palaversich 2003: 30). This substitution is reminiscent of Mel Chin’s interventions in the set of the popular series *Melrose Place* in the late nineties (“In he Name of the Place”), where “a container of Chinese food smuggled slogans [in Mandarin] from the Tiananmen Square protest onto primetime television (...), a pregnant Allison (played by Courtney Thorne-Smith) is shown working on a large quilt, but the image that unfolds is the chemical structure for RU486 - the controversial abortion pill” (“Mel Chin”).



Figure 15: Hero Dogs (2003). Obra reunida 371.

observes that Bellatin “consciously manipulates an inherent impulse in every act of reading which is the search for sense” (2003: 28). In “Hero Dogs,” he uses this procedure to invite national allegorism so as to better rebuke and distort it, thus achieving an effect one may approach along the lines of Walter Mignolo’s call to “uncouple name and reference” when it comes to thinking about “Latin America,” a concept easily mistaken with the territory it alludes to. If installation art uses sculptural materials to modify the way the viewer experiences a given space, the “space” modified by “Hero Dogs” is the very concept of Latin America.

It would require a separate study to address Bellatin’s role as the director of Escuela Dinámica de Escritores, a self-described anti-literary workshop housed in the Casa Refugio Citlaltépetl, an asylum house which is part of the network of Cities of Asylum. Escuela Dinámica defends the immersion in the arts in a broad sense as a means to bolster literary creativity, and shuns the kind of productive immediacy that has come to be expected from more established writing programs.⁴⁶ Beuys, the professor of sculpture at Düsseldorf, believed that art should effectively transform people’s everyday lives; as we can see, Bellatin presents an enlarged notion of literature that aims in the same direction. Their contexts are very different, though, and consequently the task of their persona as shamans and showmen (the expression is Donald Kuspit’s) differ.

The backdrop that reveals the potentialities of this renewed presence of the author as contemporary artist is the abundance of mediatic images that frame the author along unstated scripts: the bohemian hero, the self-promoting entrepreneur, the dignified representative of a polity, perhaps even the messiah. These images and the discourses in which they are embedded summon an utterly tame idea of the role of literature.

⁴⁶ For a compilation of the syllabi of courses imparted at Escuela Dinámica, see Bellatin 2007. The author calls this institution “un texto más” (*Otra parte*).

Consider by means of an illustration that upon acceptance of a literary prize, authors sign a binding legal document in agreement to participate in activities that include posing for promotional photography and writing sympathetic reviews about other authors from the editorial house that hosts the contest in the first place. Editorial houses in turn are not what they used to be, as André Schiffrin rightly notes, not only because they are increasingly under the control of global media conglomerates, but because the logic under which they operate assimilates authors to brand names and literature to products. This is no exaggeration: Rolex, the company that sells luxury watches, recently paired up Mario Vargas Llosa and emerging Colombian author Antonio García to participate in the “Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative.” Under the program, the younger writer was to be “offered the gift of time: one year in creative collaboration with an internationally renowned master” (Rolex).

Are the “houses of literature” –the image is Roberto Bolaño’s– part of the literary act? Given the situation of literature in regards to global capital, it is not surprising that Bellatin would endorse an expanded understanding of the literary which borrows from contemporary art the possibility of questioning the status of the art-object, as well as that of authors and their works. *Escritores duplicados* not only documents a performance that we will not experience, it illustrates that there is no substitution for the experience of reading.⁴⁷ On the other hand, Fogwill has warned against the possible commodification of what one may call “art statement novels,” by fantasizing that if he were to put his signature on a telephone book from the touristy mountain region of Calamuchita, Argentina, add the subtitle “A listing of names,” and write in

⁴⁷ Bellatin declares: “Lo que pretendo es que los lectores recorran los arcos narrativos que se le presentan. Ése es mi triunfo. No me interesa el juicio de si es bueno o malo el libro sino si lo acabaste o no. La idea es pasar por una realidad paralela, por un trance, que es lo que busco cuando voy al cine o a una exposición, mientras que en muchos libros no existe la necesidad de pasar por la lectura porque ya sabes lo que te van a decir” (Agosín).

the back cover the legend “an avant-garde operation,” he could probably sell 1500 copies through Planeta, the editorial house (qtd. in Kohan 21).

Pointing at these potential pitfalls of conceptualism in literature allows us to fine-tune our understanding of the nature of Bellatin and Aira’s project. It is not about transplanting elements from art into literature or presenting literature as art, but rather, about achieving the unsettling effect that Beuys and Duchamp had in their times. Back then, what they did *was not* art; our understanding of art grew to consider their actions as such. It is in this sense that the literary endeavors that we have studied hold the promise of the future.

The Future of Visual Imagination

The appeal of contemporary art indeed is exceptionally strong in present day Latin American literature. Besides the authors studied, we could address manifestations of this phenomenon that are more conventional in their narrative technique, but which are no less representative or important. These can be found in an established author like Roberto Bolaño, who depicts perverse performances and photographic exhibitions in *Distant Star* (1996, Trans. 2004), or in an emerging author like Vivian Abenshushan (Mexico 1972), whose short story “La conjura de los peatones” evokes situationism.⁴⁸ Pedro Lemebel’s (Santiago 1955) public appearances are political performances in their own right, while Cristina Rivera Garza’s (Matamoros 1964) own strain of experimentalism recurs to art as well. Given this configuration, one may ask: how do these manifestations speak to the times?

⁴⁸ For an account of Bolaño’s fictionalization of art, see Jennerjahn. Abenshushan’s short story appears in *El clan de los insomnes*. México: TusQuets, 2004. I thank Bruno Bosteels for bringing this text to my attention.

Beyond the obvious explanations –that contemporary art simply has become more important in the region or gained cultural prominence worldwide beyond elitist forms– “art statement novels” flourish in Latin America as dictatorship novels did not long ago: as a conscious, coordinated effort by a group of authors. A comparison with the previous project could offer valuable insights about the changing political sensibilities in the region.

In his recent essay *Espectáculos de realidad* (2007), Reinaldo Laddaga proposes a more complex explanation. He studies Aira and Bellatin’s relationship to contemporary art, foregoing close-reading for the benefit of situating them within a slightly different constellation of authors with similar concerns, including João Gilberto Noll, Severo Sarduy, the Fernando Vallejo of the multi-volume fictionalized memoir *El río del tiempo* (1987-1993), and Osvaldo Lamborghini as a young playwright. For Laddaga, these works are a response to an epoch marked by an overabundance of information. As his argument goes, since the written word in recent times is seldom entirely isolated from (moving) images and sound, authors more freely engage elements from beyond the field of the literary, defined in narrow terms (20).⁴⁹ Moreover, they aspire to the “condition” of contemporary art, understood as that of escaping the presentation of concrete objects –one assumes, the overabundant “data”– and offer instead “perspectivas, ópticas, marcos que permitan observar un proceso que se encuentra en curso” (14). Thus, they share a defense of aesthetic values such as improvisation, immediacy, textual mutation, and the induction of thrill [“trance”].

⁴⁹ One could relate this argument to Jonathan Culler’s recent reminder that “the literary” itself is subject to expansion and displacement: “We can think of literary works as language with particular properties or features, and we can think of literary works as language framed in particular ways, but any account of particular properties or of perceptual framing leads us to shift back ultimately into the other mode. The qualities of literature, it seems, can’t be reduced either to objective properties or to consequences of ways of framing language.” (25) Since over a course of time there are significant changes in the practices that we refer to as literary, one could borrow Culler’s terms in supposing that contemporary Latin American literature undergoes a transfer of “the literary interest” from “the literary work itself” to the literary work grasped in its relation to performance or concept (40).

Although we do live in a different media ecology than, say, in the heyday of the Boom, it is still a matter of debate whether the difference is qualitative or quantitative: the coup against Salvador Allende, after all, was broadcast *on television*. Some of us are skeptics as to whether the emergence of the internet parts the waters all by itself, when one considers it against the background, as Benedict Anderson did recently, of the long-standing availability of virtually instant global communication that began with telegraphs. Similarly, Jonathan Beller considers that what we witness today is not a rupture but the intensification of what he denominates the “cinematic mode of production.” Bluntly put, capitalist exploitation through the capture of our senses is a process which becomes more efficient with the introduction of new technologies. Laddaga in turn holds an optimistic view, where the new reader surfs through many channels with ease and not only finds the written word in various forms along the way, but also articulates it together with the creation of new spaces for solidarity (151). This view could hold true, as the accompanying volume *Estética de la emergencia* (2006) seeks to show through extensive documentation of collaborative literary-artistic forms that function in a de-centralized way that is both micro-political and yet supranational. However, we should also ponder the degree to which our attention and visual imaginations are coopted.

Although reaching out to contemporary art may be a response to information saturation, it is not evident that art will make the clutter go away. As we rethink literary studies in the wake of new media technologies, we will do best in looking beyond enthusiasm and considering related phenomena like “continuous partial attention” or the nostalgia embedded into human relations that take place primordially in virtual realms (Inda and Rosaldo 13). From the present horizon, one tends to approach the art practices inaugurated by Duchamp or Beuys through concepts like “multimedia” and “interactivity.” However, in terms of attention economy, operations

like multi-tasking stand at the opposite end of the spectrum to Beuysian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. While new technologies chiefly enhance the productive dispersion of attention, performance revolves around highly intensified moments of unproductive attention.⁵⁰

The common denominator, then, is not so much the practice itself but the hunger it tries to mitigate. In times of globalization and virtuality, we share conceptualist anxiety with objectivity and performance art's concern with depth of experience. The problem is less data or objects than our investments in them. One may then coincide with Laddaga on how the peculiar surface of a text like *Lecciones para una liebre muerta* reflects forms of the language of new media, namely those of the database and the navigatable space ("espacio navegable," 142). But on the other hand, failing to see beyond these forms would be responding to absence with more absence. Instead, we could regard them as the relics of performance, as something that stands in place of an experience that is missing. Understanding a writer as a contemporary artist or curator should not necessarily lead us to regarding the writer's books as works of art; they may be, indeed, only remainders thereof.

If Laddaga is right in claiming that there is a trend towards "spectacles of reality," defined as acts of displaying that seek to reorganize the relations between familiar elements, then we must see how such a reorganization also involves hegemony, not only personal drama. Duchamp and Beuys's own personal narratives played out politically; they aspired to be less of a spectacle and more of a mirror—distorted, to be sure—that changed the world. A spectacle of reality as a desired effect is always already a tragedy; what we find then in books that want to go beyond the book is a sense of failure. Duchamp's interruption of Taylorism is a small feat as compared to

⁵⁰ Thistlewood describes Beuys's performances as "momentary arresting of forms or actions for special and particularly energized attention" (1).

the interruption of global capitalism, among other reasons because we would like to keep the latter's perks and forget its darker side. "Duchamp en México" speaks to this situation with its wandering tourist who makes globalization visible at the level of consumption and invisible at that of production. Similarly, *Perros héroes* explores structures of subordination and allegiance that do not suffice to explain the contemporary subject's position among the conflicting realms of the private, the national, and the global.

Although there is consensus about the need to approach these texts in a way that values process over product, it is not clear how to proceed. The model put forward here does not withdraw completely from close-readings, even though what is at stake is literature's potential to conjure a certain image of global culture.

Aira and Bellatin's borrowings from contemporary art lie further away from media culture than from elite culture, closer to Samuel Beckett than to an internet-savvy crowd. Are the likes of Beuys and Duchamp additions to a global multimedia incarnation of high-culture? Is Latin American literature's image of the global ultimately caught up in eurocentrism? Be it as it may, we may see Latin American literature's turn towards contemporary art as a strategy of global notoriety. This strategy is one among several similar gestures that seek to destabilize the rituals involved in the circulation of literature, denouncing their consumerism and exoticism –and at times, unwillingly, or not quite, reproducing them. The larger trend is towards disrupting the repository of global visual culture as a way of estranging and re-mediating cultural hegemony.

By assuming the persona of the author as contemporary artist, writers seek to avert the commodification of their presence in a globalized economy. They succeed to the extent that they challenge existing ways of understanding literary practice. Indeed, the peculiar afterlife of Beuys and Duchamp in Latin America talks about interconnec-

tedness and unpredictability in the circulation of cultural capital at a global level. The elephant in the room is, however, that the *image* of the Latin American writer that transcends national, regional, and academic boundaries is by and large, still, that of the Boom.

CHAPTER 3

MEDELLÍN, CAPITAL OF THE WORLD: VISUAL CULTURE AS RELIGION IN *OUR LADY OF THE ASSASSINS*

El ojo que ves no es
ojo porque tú lo veas;
es ojo porque te ve.

Antonio Machado (1875-1939)

In Fernando Vallejo's *La Virgen de los Sicarios* (1994, trans. *Our Lady of the Assassins* 2001), an aging grammarian named "Fernando" recounts his temporary relocation to Medellín, the city of his childhood, where he falls in love with two teenage contract killers: first Alexis, who dies halfway through the story, and then Wílmor, who turns out to be Alexis's murderer and is murdered himself towards the end. Such simple overarching tragic structure frames the killing and praying sprees that the characters either witness or undertake as they stroll through the streets and churches of the city. These activities accompany the crucial aspect that this chapter will focus on: Fernando's lengthy diatribe against humanity, which, as this chapter will show, provides a meaningful site to think through the present configuration of global culture. By positing visual culture as religion, the novel carries out a transcendental exploration of the limits of the visual as an instrument for mediation between local, national, and global realms.

An Open Letter to a Foreign Tourist

The plot of the novel is modeled on the pervasive state of social disarray that Medellín underwent during the early nineties.⁵¹ In a mock pedagogical tone, the narrator characterizes those dire times by presenting an extensive inventory of crimes ranging from assassinations in broad day light to acts of petty thievery: “En los sanitarios (le voy a explicar a usted porque es turista extranjero) no pueden poner papel higiénico porque se roban el rollo: cuando inauguraron el aeropuerto nuevo de Medellín, que costó una millonada, un solo día lo pusieron y nunca más [In the toilets (I’m going to explain this because you’re a foreign tourist) they can’t put toilet paper, because the rolls get stolen: when they inaugurated the new Medellin airport, which cost a fortune, they put toilet paper in for one day and never again]” (38-39, 38).⁵² With such vitriolic sarcasm, the text parades the many flaws of the city life of its day; had it not been a novel but a brochure for foreign tourists, it would have traded a commonplace like “come, taste the best coffee in the world,” for “come, experience the thrill of being the potential victim of random murder.” But who is “the reader” in *Our Lady*? Although they do not necessarily coincide with the book’s actual readership, there are various intended readers that constitute a recurrent motif within the plot and that conjure the book’s interpellative power.

⁵¹ The action spans about nine months, for at the beginning the secondary character “La Plaga” plans to make his girlfriend pregnant with a child that would “avenge him,” (35) and towards the end he is expecting the delivery (112). Interspersed with many flashbacks, the main plotline ends in the first semester of 1994, for it mentions events that took place during the government of Colombian president César Gaviria (1990-1994) and after the death of drug trafficker Pablo Escobar (December 2, 1993). As if to underscore a sense of immediacy and realism, the first edition of the novel came out by May 1994. For an early review of the novel, see Robledo. For an account of life in Medellín during the heyday of Pablo Escobar’s war against the State compared to the pacified city of today, see Hylton, who mentions that “around 500 policemen were assassinated in Medellín in 1990-91, and Escobar’s minions set off some 150 car bombs” (82-83). These facts notwithstanding, for an argument about how the novel exaggerates the situation in the city, see Restrepo-Gautier. For a social history of the rise and impact of drug cartels in Medellín, see Roldán.

⁵² I cite Paul Hammond’s translation of *Our Lady* into British English. Henceforth, the first page number reference given will correspond to the original text and the second to the translation.

The narrator assimilates such “readers” by addressing his diatribe indistinctly to them. Some are properly foreign tourists, like the ill-advised traveler who would expect to find toilet paper in the bathrooms of the city’s airport; others are just foreigners, such as “the Swiss,” who appear as idealized First World citizens that would have a particularly hard time to come to terms with the realities at hand, and for whom the narrator stands as a perverse mediator. Describing the murder of presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán (1943-1989), who was stepping onto a platform to deliver a speech during a political rally when thugs sent by drug kingpin Pablo Escobar shot him down, Fernando reports:

Cayó el muñeco con su afán protagonístico. Muerto logró lo que quiso en vida. La tumbada de la tarima le dio la vuelta al mundo e hizo resonar el nombre de la patria. Me sentí tan, pero tan orgulloso de Colombia... ‘Ustedes –les dije a los suizos– prácticamente están muertos. Reparen en esas imágenes que ven: eso es vida, pura vida’ [The marionette went down and his hero’s ambitions with him. Dead he achieved what he sought in life. The rumble on the dais went all round the world and caused the name of my country to ring out. I felt so ver, very proud of Colombia... ‘You,’ I said to the Swiss, ‘are practically dead. Observe the images before you: that is life, pure life’] (40, 40-41).

Whereas the Swiss stand as the epitome of a boring, predictable, well-regulated life, Fernando stands as an authoritative voice that can guide them as they take a peek into the sort of chaos that allegedly could liven up their lives a little. Through the Swiss, any reader is called upon, as the passage underscores the contrast between the violent story being told and the rather peaceful activity of sitting down to read a novel. Such emotional appeal is one among the many more or less obvious rhetorical devices that the keen grammarian –and, one assumes, rhetorician– will deploy throughout the text; note however that it is not straightforward to determine what emotions are being mobilized or who the intended audience is. If one were to part from the basic starting

point of a rhetorical analysis and ask “*who* is saying *what* to *whom* using what *medium* with what *effects*?” the answer, succinctly, would be that “who” is a caricature of a hyperbolically cultured and nostalgic individual with idiosyncratically fascist political views, “what” is nonsense or dark humor (“you who live are dead, we who die are alive”), the “medium” is an eloquent rant, “effects” and “whom” are open questions.

Such is the not so secret ambition of *Our Lady*: to be a text that interpellates readers from radically different social and geopolitical positionalities, that confronts each of them, as it were, in their own terms. For the Colombian reader who approaches the passage cited above, it would allude to a persistent concern of local media which is “la imagen en el exterior,” literally the image of the country in foreign lands. Colombian newspapers, magazines, and *noticieros* constantly echo what major international media say about the country, to a point where the discourse of improving the country’s “image” often supersedes that of improving the living conditions of its actual people.⁵³ Thus, Fernando’s pun is that Galán, who was going to “clean” the country’s image, became another victim in the war that sullied it. The local reader may then experience a redoubled sense of shame and grief, and, perhaps, see in the distorted pride that Fernando derives from the action (“Me sentí tan, pero tan orgulloso de Colombia”) a criticism to the prevailing ideology of preserving the image.

In turn, Fernando’s perverse rendering of the cliché of Latin America as a place of wonder shames the “foreign” reader. Arguably, this effect is heightened by the way in which the novel circulates in a global market of books: as Herrero Olaizola has shown, editorial houses and reviewers promote the novel’s presentation of marginalization as

⁵³ Arguably, concern with the country’s image stems from the assumptions that, since Colombia is dependent in many ways on foreign aid given by Western democracies, and since such nations make decisions based on social consensus, then it is in the best interest of the country to have a “good image” among such polities. Of course, different local social actors have rivaling standards for defining what makes a good image; strikingly, all camps seem to endorse lobbying as a way of doing politics.

a sales-pitch (43). Thus, the book delivers what its reputation promises, except in a far more crass –if highly aestheticized– way than expected. Although a phenomenological enquiry of the experiences of actual readerships would be based on speculation, one may assume that, should there be souls as beautiful as the novel’s Swiss, then the novel would lead them to disappointment, for there is no final catharsis that would confine the horror of the book to a faraway land. Instead, the addressed readers take their place among the city’s “living dead” and Fernando leaves them behind: “Bueno parcerero, aquí nos separamos, hasta aquí me acompaña usted. Muchas gracias por su compañía y tome usted, por su lado, su camino que yo me sigo en cualquiera de estos buses para donde vaya, para donde sea [Okay, *parcerero*, you and I have come this far, but now we must go our separate ways. Many thanks for your company but from here on in, you’re on your own. As for me, I’m taking one of these buses wherever it’s going, wherever that may be]” (121, 132).

It would seem that through this fictional device eventually foreign and local readers change places. However, throughout the book, Fernando has relativized positionality; he has commingled the foreign and the local, unifying, but not amalgamating, his audience. If his highly oral style were an actual public speech, this invocation would amount to individually addressing people who are standing against the wall, those who are sitting in the front row, those who are further on, and so forth in order to create a sense of community.⁵⁴ The comparison illustrates part of the dialectics of the text’s invocation, for its actual spirit would be best described as anti-ecumenical. Thus, along with the Swiss and the tourist readers, Fernando addresses civil authorities, such as the attorney general, whom he mocks by asking, as if it were under his *de facto* power, that he protect him from the constant threat of getting killed

⁵⁴ Luz Mary Giraldo has claimed that Vallejo adopts the voice of the traditional folk character of the *culebrero*, a traveling salesman, healer, and showman who congregates multitudes in public spaces in Antioquia and other regions of Colombia (278).

(21). He also addresses well-to-do Colombians (“Ustedes que dizque son tan buenos católicos” 53, see also 70), as well as a certain heterosexual male middle-class TV spectator:

Es de poca caridad, ya sé, exhibir la dicha propia ante la desgracia ajena, contarle historias de amor libre a quien vive prisionero, encerrado, casado, con mujer gorda y propia y cinco hijos comiendo, jodiendo y viendo televisión [It’s not very charitable, I know, to exhibit your own happiness in front of other people’s misfortune, to recount stories of unbridled love to someone who lives as a prisoner, locked up, married, with a prim, fat wife and five kids eating, whining and watching television] (24, 22).

What these “readers” have in common is that they incarnate traditional middle-class values. Their Other is thus constituted by outlaws, proletarians, and queers, but also by the leisure class, which only the aristocratic grammarian don represents. Some traits identify Fernando with middle and low class values as well, such as his religious zeal, although he distorts this by being as devout –he spends his days praying– as he is heretical: “Dios no existe y si existe es la gran gonorrrea [“God doesn’t exist and, if he does, he’s the big gonorrrea]” (78, 83). Thus, beyond *épater les bourgeois*, Fernando aims at arousing indignation across society by assuming extreme positions on various ideological spectra. Just as he is too religious to be atheist and vice versa, he is too cosmopolitan to be a consequent chauvinist and too chauvinist to be truly cosmopolitan. Similarly, his elegy of “free” or “true” love contrasts with the real nature of his relationships, which revolve around objectifying fascination and seeking relief from spleen, and which in fact one may see as bordering on in-house prostitution if one considers the “gifts” he offers his pauper lovers, namely brand-name clothing and electrical appliances, as suggestive of exploitation.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Daniel Balderston concurs: “La índole clasista de la relación entre Fernando y los sicarios es suficientemente clara: ellos quieren dinero y regalos de él, son conscientes de que los separa una diferencia económica y de que ellos ocupan un lugar muy vulnerable dentro de la estructura social. Al

If we consider the role of the intellectual as that of questioning relentlessly or of confronting a given audience's ideological presuppositions, we can appreciate the sheer intellectual labor present in Fernando, a product of Vallejo's puppetry. The scope of such questioning includes both a given juncture in the Colombian experience of the so-called "war on drugs" and distinct dynamics of our reputedly global era. The reader experiences something similar to what happened to Fernando when, upon seeing a Nativity scene (pesebre), he goes through a lucid hallucination where "era como si la realidad de adentro contuviera la realidad de afuera y no viceversa, que en la carretera a Sabaneta había una casita con un pesebre que tenía otra carretera a Sabaneta [it was as if on the road to Sabaneta there was a little house with a Nativity scene which contained another road to Sabaneta]" (14, 10). The Nativity scene is a scale model of Medellín as Medellín is a scale model of the world, except the relation between model and reality is founded on paradox: the global appears as a subset of the local. The point then is less whether local middle class-values travel well abroad or whether there actually exists a supranational community of bien-pensants for the book to address, but to inscribe such issues into a broad exploration of the contradictory nature of a potentially global polity. Fernando's constant dislocation of an imaginary audience and his confrontation of this audience's convictions is thus a means to put forward an aporetic exploration.

In this sense, the book's goal is to be nothing less than an Aleph, in the Borgesian sense of the term, an artifact that can reveal the entire universe at once: "el lugar donde están, sin confundirse, todos los lugares del orbe, vistos desde todos los ángulos [the place where, without admixture or confusion, all the places of the world, seen

comprar sus favores (aun cuando lo haga de forma sutil), el narrador abre un debate sobre los privilegios de clase, posición económica y edad" (158-159). Furthermore, I would venture that Fernando's discourse could be equally "offensive," if by different means, to a homophobic and to a queer readership.

from every angle, coexist]” (623, 276).⁵⁶ It is not a coincidence that when Fernando (finally) visits the slums, he makes the following observation, which I will juxtapose with Borges’s classic image:

Hasta allá subí a buscar a la mamá de Alexis y de paso a su asesino. Vi al subir los “graneros”, esas tienduchas donde venden yucas y plátanos, enrejados ¿para que no les roben la miseria? Vi las canchas de fútbol voladas sobre los rodaderos. Vi el laberinto de las calles y las empinadas escaleras. Y abajo la otra ciudad, en el valle, rumorosa... [I went up there to look for Alexis’s mother and his killer too, in passing. On the way up I saw the *graneros*, those dirty little minimarts where they sell yuccas and plantains, behind bars. Is it so nobody can make off with their misery? I saw the football pitches sticking out over the precipices. I saw the maze of streets and the steep steps. And down below the other city, in the valley, full of sound...] (86,93).

El diámetro del Aleph sería de dos o tres centímetros, pero el espacio cósmico estaba ahí, sin disminución de tamaño. Cada cosa (la luna del espejo, digamos) era infinitas cosas, porque yo claramente la veía desde todos los puntos del universo. Vi el populoso mar, vi el alba y la tarde, vi las muchedumbres de América, vi una plateada telaraña en el centro de una negra pirámide, vi un laberinto roto (era Londres), vi interminables ojos inmediatos escrutándose en mí como en un espejo, [...] y sentí vértigo y lloré, porque mis ojos habían visto ese objeto secreto y conjetural, cuyo nombre usurpan los hombres, pero que ningún hombre ha mirado: el inconcebible universo [The Aleph was probably two or three centimeters in diameter, but universal space was contained inside it, with no diminution in size. Each thing (the glass surface of a mirror, let us say) was infinite things, because I could clearly see it from every point in the universe. I saw the populous sea, saw the dawn and dusk, saw the multitudes of the Americas, saw a silvery spider-web at the center of a black pyramid, saw a broken labyrinth (it was London), saw endless eyes, all very close, studying themselves in me as in a mirror, (...) and I felt dizzy, and I wept, because my eyes had seen that secret, hypothetical object whose men has been usurped by men but which no man has ever truly looked upon: the inconceivable universe] (625, 278-279).

Apart from borrowing the iteration of the verb ‘to see’ or recurring to the motif of the labyrinth, there are crucial concerns that Vallejo derives from Borges, such as the

⁵⁶ I cite Andrew Hurley’s translation of Borges.

use of a highly visual language in order to re-articulate the relation between the infra-local and the metropolitan –such as finding London in a neighborhood house in Buenos Aires. Of course, in 1949, when Borges published his short story, television sets were not a common find in households around the world; neither did they deliver anything remotely close to the CNN fantasy of real-time coverage of everything.⁵⁷ Vallejo's overdetermined aleph of a slum is thus informed both by the Argentine author and by the experience of global media; it proposes an intersection between a mystifying awe at totality and a stultifying familiarity with its mediatic representation. As it were, it sets in a crash course against each other the aesthesis of the aleph and the anesthesia of watching the news.

Is the slum then *the* site to think through the present configuration of the global? To some extent the Colombian author shares the path taken more recently by Mike Davis, who claims that present-day slums offer a glimpse into the future of the city.⁵⁸ However, it is not in the outdated apocalyptical admonition that the world will look a lot more like Medellín did in the nineties that lies the interest of *Our Lady*, but in the way in which slums, which are almost completely absent from Fernando's narration, constitute an unreachable thing in itself, a city within the city that reveals the truths of the world, class-struggle included. Vallejo's path is thus towards an impossible revelation; it assumes the form of a conjectural transcendental exploration. In other words, it examines the limits of audiovisual media such as television, but also of novels themselves, when it comes to reaching the real.

⁵⁷ For a history of television, see Abramson.

⁵⁸ "[T]he cities of the future, rather than being made out of glass and steel as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists, are instead largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks, and scrap wood. Instead of cities of light soaring toward heaven, much of the twenty-first-century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay" (19).

A Heart so Red

There are two moments in *Our Lady*'s transcendental enquiry and various matters that serve as its ulterior objects. These moments are an aporetic exploration, of which the motif of the "ubiquitous reader" is but an example, and a provocative resolution. The ultima thule involves the longed-for yet irrecoverable childhood, the slums, the figure of the Virgin, the object of love, among others. Fernando's failed search for a thing in itself happens along an axis defined by immanence, liminality, and transcendence. At first sight, the overall effect of the assimilation of readers from different social and geo political positionalities is a certain "flattening" of the world, a vision of the world as a common space in which everything is immanent.⁵⁹ But are TV spectators not always *más allá*, that is, beyond? Indeed, in addition to the matryoshka-like figure suggested above, *Our Lady* alternatively offers visions of the world as many places separated by long distances and a vision of the world as a single space.

Restrepo-Gautier rightly claims that the book systematically denies any possibility of transcendence (97); it does, however, constantly taunt the reader with such a possibility; for instance, by creating the expectation that the couple of Wílmara and Fernando might flee Medellín and live happily elsewhere. Whereas for the critic the insistence on immanence serves the purposes of subverting the concept of the sublime in the gothic novel in order to portray Medellín as an utterly inescapable hell, one may extend and problematize this conceptualization in regards to what it means for the configuration of the global through media culture. In other words, we should analyze the ways in which the novel brings about an immanent understanding of the global in

⁵⁹ For a questionable if influential use of the metaphor of "a flat world" for the purposes of celebrating economic globalization as an alleged "leveler of the playing field," see Friedman.

which, paradoxically, it is both the case that “Medellín is the world” and that there is no outside of the realm of media.

What makes this odd effect possible is the articulation of Fernando’s peculiar ontological and theological premises with his political views. When he states that Galán “achieved in death what he wanted in life,” he implies that the candidate’s central goal was not to become president or to put forward a certain political program, but to appear on global television. Galán’s death actually paved the way for deep (if insufficient) political reform that involved the constitution of the assembly that would draft the new national constitution (Dugas 808). It is significant then that *Our Lady* should transform this local sacrificial structure by conjoining Galán’s transit from life to death to a transit from flesh to screen, equating the praxis of politics with media exposure and identifying figuration at the global level with transcendence. Along the same lines, Fernando playfully assimilates existence itself to being on television: “ni él ni yo habíamos aparecido en televisión, o sea que prácticamente ni existíamos [Neither he nor I had ever been on television, which is to say we practically didn’t exist]” (91, 98). Under this antinomic logic, Galán finally “existed,” only to cease existing.

Because Swiss and Colombians do not fall neatly along the lines of a life vs. death dichotomy, the television screen appears as a membrane that alternatively envelops the world as a whole, or communicates two worlds, or, even, two spiritual realms.

Fernández L’Hoeste has shown that Vallejo recreates Dante’s inferno both in his depiction of Medellín and in the narrative structure of the novel.⁶⁰ Under this light, we can see how there is a double movement of “dragging” the foreign reader into hell and of constantly trying, ineffectively, to escape it. Not even the sky over Medellín offers respite, for it is “angry” (87), and when it rains, rancor pours down. However, there

⁶⁰ “Para recrear los círculos de Dante, Vallejo opta por un recorrido de las iglesias de Medellín, de manera que sugieran, a modo de comparación, las diferentes gradaciones de un tormento” (763).

was a time, narrated in the first few pages of the novel, when Fernando was a child and Medellín supposedly a semi-rural paradise; then, the skies were crystalline and the hopes were high. Let us consider this time in some detail, for it illustrates the dual mediatic/religious visual regime that, embedded into the novel's onto-theological frame, leads towards the constitution of a particular kind of liminal space.

The defining image of the passage is that of a balloon that alludes to earth due to its shape and enormous size, as the child remembers it, of “ciento veinte pliegos [a hundred and twenty pleats]”:

Más allá [de Sabaneta] no había nada, ahí el mundo empezaba a bajar, a redondearse, a dar la vuelta. *Y eso lo constaté* la tarde que elevamos el globo más grande que hubieran visto los cielos de Antioquia (...) [Further on there was nothing, there the world started to drop away, get bumpy, veer off. *And that was something I found out* the afternoon we released maybe the biggest balloon the skies of Antioquia had ever seen (...)] (7,1; my emphasis).

By eventually flying away, it goes unsaid, like childhood does, the balloon lets young Fernando know that the earth is round and that the world is bigger than the home town he would one day abandon. Note how the balloon stands *both* for the world blurring into antioqueño skies and for Colombia losing its path in immensity, as the narrator, adopting his magisterial tone for the first time, carries on and introduces the following parallel “explanations” that add the final link to the signifying chain that goes from childhood to balloon, earth, and finally back to Colombia:

¡[P]ero qué saben ustedes de globos! *¿Saben qué son?* Son rombos o cruces o esferas hechos de papel de china deleznable, y por dentro llevan una candileja encendida que los llena de humo para que suban. El humo es como quien dice su alma, y la candileja el corazón. Cuando se llenan de humo y empiezan a jalar, los que los están elevando sueltan, soltamos, y el globo se va yendo, yendo al

cielo con el corazón encendido, palpitando, como el Corazón de Jesús. *¿Saben quién es?* Nosotros teníamos uno en la sala; en la sala de la casa de la calle del Perú de la ciudad de Medellín, capital de Antioquia; en la casa en donde yo nací, en la sala entronizado o sea (porque sé que no van a saber) bendecido un día por el cura. A él está consagrada Colombia, mi patria. [But what do you people know about balloons? *Do you know what they are?* They're diamonds or crosses or spheres made out of flimsy rice paper and inside they have a small lighted candle which fills them with smoke so's they rise. People say the smoke is their soul and the candle their heart. When the balloons fill up with smoke and start to tug we, the ones who're holding them, let them go and up the balloon soars, up to heaven with its heart lit up, palpitating, like the Sacred Heart of Jesus. *Do you know who he is?* We used to have one in the living room; in the living room of the house in Calle del Perú in the city of Medellín, capital of Antioquia; in the house where I was born, in the living room, enthronised or rather (because I know you won't know the word), blessed one day by the priest. My country, Colombia is consecrated to him] (1-2, 7; my emphasis).

With a compelling metonymic displacement that binds Fernando to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, this overdetermined image is indicative of the many aspects that come together around the novel's treatment of iconic figures –as Galán is at a local level and Escobar at a global level, as the Sacred Heart is among the faithful. [Fig. 16] The aftermath of the passage inaugurates the book's systematic denial of transcendence: after the nostalgic image of the fleeing balloon, which would fit as a comforting ending to a *Bildungsroman*, the narrator speculates that after all perhaps it just burned “como bastó una chispa para que se nos incendiara después Colombia [like a spark was enough for Colombia to be set alight afterwards]” (8,3). In the novel's unfolding tight economy of transcendence, one could rephrase this by saying “the only way for anything Colombian to sublate is to go up in flames.” Observe moreover that the tension between immanence and transcendence plays itself out in the contrast between the breezy movement of the balloon and the bounded, geometrical, target-like centrality that the Sacred Heart occupies within a series of, as it were, ever larger



Figure 16: The Sacred Heart of Jesus. 12 Apr. 2008.

<<http://mckinleyfuneral.com/cards23456/SacredHeartJesus.jpg>>



Figure 17: Shrine of María Auxiliadora, Sabaneta. 12 Apr. 2008.

<http://flickr.com/photos/iris_pneuma/2245363060/>

circles: a room, a house, a block, a street, and so forth, each of which represents the different rings of addressees.

But what is the Sacred Heart doing in the opening pages of a novel entitled *Our Lady of the Assassins*? And what does Virgin Mary stand for, if, at least initially, Fernando's suffering is represented by Jesus's bleeding heart and not by Mary? Previous studies have addressed the religious elements in the text as literary or as cultural references. Thus, Fernández L'Hoeste and Restrepo Gautier discuss, respectively, how they constitute literary references to Dante and to the gothic novel; whereas as cultural references they belong to a constellation of elements such as the three scapulars that *sicarios* carry, the "balas rezadas" [consecrated bullets] they prepare before a hit, or their devotion to the Virgin of Sabaneta, to whom they prayed for marksmanship and personal safety.⁶¹ [Fig. 17] Their interest, however, goes beyond verisimilitude or literariness, for religious images are themselves a threshold between the local and the global, between regional religiosity and the worldwide structure of a Church that plays a crucial role in defining Colombian national identity and in mediating between the country and the world. One must then touch on the doctrinal aspects of this problem, if only tangentially, in order to show that the visual regime of the religious icon counterbalances that of television, contributing to the book's aporetic exploration of the contradictions of the global, and, ultimately, making way for an aggravating resolution of such contradictions.

Consider the Sacred Heart of Jesus as an instrument of mediation that, unlike the moving images of television, stays put. It serves the purposes of binding the faithful, along the lines of the etymological sense of "religion," *re-ligare*, to tie in together. The

⁶¹ Incidentally, these details are true to fact. For all the imprecations of Fernando against "los sociólogos," and their theories about the phenomenon of the *sicario* (the term used to refer to the young contract killers that worked for the Medellín drug cartel) a likely source for Vallejo's reconstruction of their system of beliefs is social scientist Alonso Salazar's *No nacimos pa' semilla: la cultura de las bandas juveniles de Medellín* (1990; trans. *Born to Die in Medellín*, 1992).

way in which Colombians are bound by this particular icon deserves attention. As Fernando says, it is prominently displayed in numerous households as a preferred object of devotion; to this day, apart from its religious significance, it serves informally as a national symbol. As such, it operates as a statement about Colombia's place in the world and as the two dimensional representation of both a world view and a national ideology. In effect, up to the constitutional reform of 1991, the country was officially consecrated to the Sacred Heart, a dedication legislated in the late 19th century: "In 1898, a year before Leo XIII promulgated an encyclical in which he offered all humankind to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the government of Colombia issued a law acknowledging the 'social reign' of Jesus Christ" (Londoño-Vega 53). The image establishes a link between private, national, and global realms, placing Colombia at the "avant-garde" of Catholic humanism and investing traditional family values with a claim to universality.

Fernando constructs his anti-Catholic claims to universality over the remnants of this structure. As the Sacred Heart welcomes the visitor to many a Colombian home, the image of the red balloon/Sacred Heart greets the foreign tourist to Vallejo's novel, which is about an impossible return home and shuns traditional family values such as heterosexual male ascendancy and the holiness of maternity. Step in a new icon, apt for modern times: the Virgin of the Hitmen, whose rule irradiates from Medellín onto the world. Like the balloon and the Sacred Heart, *Our Lady* stands at a threshold. Unlike religious icons, which disguise hegemony as ecumenism and appease contradiction, *Our Lady* exposes hegemony and deepens contradiction precisely by unmasking global mediatic ecumenism as a form of piety.

Such is the spirit behind inflammatory statements like the following, where Fernando claims that by exemplifying certain "universal truths," Medellín foreshadows the future of the world: "Los pobres producen más pobres y la miseria más

miseria, y mientras más miseria más asesinos, y mientras más asesinos más muertos. Ésta es la ley de Medellín, que regirá en adelante para toda la tierra [The poor produce more poor and misery produces more misery, and the more misery there is, the more killings there are, and the more killing there is, the more dead bodies there are. Such is the law of Medellin, which will henceforth rule throughout the globe]” (83, 89).

Contrast this stance with the social role of Virgin Mary, as described in Leo XIII’s encyclical on socialism *Quod apostolici muneris* (1878):

[O]ur holy Mother [does] not neglect the care of the poor or omit to provide for their necessities; but, rather, drawing them to her with a mother's embrace, and knowing that they bear the person of Christ Himself, who regards the smallest gift to the poor as a benefit conferred on Himself, holds them in great honor. She does all she can to help them; she provides homes and hospitals where they may be received, nourished, and cared for all the world over and watches over these. (...) But who does not see that this is the best method of arranging the old struggle between the rich and poor? (Vatican)

At least in part, a sharp rebuttal of this maternal mechanism of social consolation accounts for Fernando’s misogyny, and in particular for his condemnation of motherhood. Fernando does not see any contradiction in celebrating the shooting of pregnant women and praying devotedly to the mother of God. This opens the space for a variety of readings, such as seeing these two activities as part of a continuum (the underlying claim being that Catholicism and *machismo* go hand in hand) or regarding their coexistence as an instance of an overarching strategy of provocation. The methodical attack against a religiously co-opted notion of motherhood would reveal Fernando as a perverse sort of agitator in disguise who sought to undo the deeds of Leo XIII’s reactionary ideas and its correlation in Colombian *Regeneración conservadora*,⁶² except that, in his typically self-contradictory manner, he is at the

⁶²For an overview of relevant historiographical sources, see Cortés Guerrero.

same time profoundly nostalgic for the ways of the old National Constitution. Note, however, that what Fernando hates in women is wombs, as he hates penises in men: the two times his lovers take off their shorts, their guns fall to the ground and are thus assimilated by proximity to sexual organs; when he sees the penis of a dead man he claims it is “incapaz de volver a engendrar, hacer el mal [now incapable of begetting children, of doing any more evil]” (118, 129). In other words: for Fernando, human reproduction, particularly that of poor humans, is intrinsically evil.⁶³

Our Lady is thus the opposite of the Sacred Heart, which stands for “God’s love for mankind.” While the Sacred Heart was geared towards placating social unrest in the world by visually reinforcing the promise of otherworldly rewards –blessed be the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven– the Virgin of the Hitmen fights fire with fire. In this sense, the novel presents itself as a misogynist and misanthropic book of prayer to the matron of death who would deliver humans from each other. The book’s theology results from taking a certain anomaly as the rule, that is, from seeing in *sicarios’* devotion to the Virgin of Sabaneta not a folly, but a theologically sound practice. But do the two devotions differ? Indeed, Colombia’s recent history casts a shadow of a doubt on the expediency of the Sacred Heart and of the Catholic humanist doctrine it represents; arguably, a similar kind of autocratic, self-serving devotion may be at work in both cases. Note however that *Our Lady* is far from being a manual of subversion: as we will see later on, existentialist desolation takes the upper hand over social outrage.

⁶³In Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*, Silenus famously says that the only thing better than dying is to never have been born at all (1224f), while in Borges’ short story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” a heresiarc from Uqbar claims that copulation and mirrors are abominable because they multiply men (431). As if bridging these lines of thought, Fernando commends gay sex *because* it does not lead to reproduction (“los maricas son buenos en esta explosión demográfica” 42). Note how such statement is ambiguously both a tragic negation of life and a playful vindication of gay sexuality that turns a “homosexuality is contra natura” argument against itself.

The center of gravity of Fernando's multidirectional imprecation is the Christian notion of charity, which he identifies as an underlying current that determines global and local "interaction" through media images. In secularized times, the religious icon does not (as prominently) mediate between the global and the local, but television sets do. Fernando's heterogeneous audience shares a televised form of piety best portrayed in mourning for the troubles of a distant fellow human being while sitting on a couch. *Our Lady* purports that this mediation is as much about charity as it is about Schadenfreude, and that foreigners, affluent locals, and even civil authorities, who are thus accused of reducing citizenship to spectacle, are for all practical purposes equally distant from the (mostly violent) events that make it into the late night news. Leo XIII's doctrine was possibly more influential in Antioquia, where it led to strong-rooted Catholic corporatism which kept socialism at bay, than in most parts of the First World, which took the path of secularization and of separating church and public affairs earlier and more thoroughly. Or did they?

According to *Our Lady*, a sacrificial horizon mediates the relations between the global and the local. When public affairs are themselves global, then secularization is not to be taken for granted: there is, so to speak, a blood-dripping, burning heart on every television. Leo XIII lives on in prime time, as media set in place a structure of consolation we can describe borrowing words that Susan Sontag used in a slightly different context: "The feeling of being exempt from calamity stimulates interest in looking at painful pictures, and looking at them suggests and strengthens the feeling that one is exempt" (65). The distressing moving pictures of television bring a sense of protection to the household, fulfilling in this respect the role of an image of a suffering Christ. Fernando grounds this line of thought by observing that one never sleeps better than when one is spared from the worst: "dormirse con tiroteo es mejor que con aguacero [To go to sleep to the sound of shooting is better than to the sound of rain]"

(40, 40). As the Swiss curl up in bed to the sound of gunshots in TV, the well-off antioqueño does the same, less successfully, to the sound of nearby shootings.

Consequently, the novel mobilizes the visual regime of religious imagery to disrupt the visual regime of global mediatic imagination. In so doing, it portrays the experience of global media as instilled with undertheorized religious eschatological beliefs: just as the religious icon brings the divine home yet nothing *stricto sensu* walks through the door, television gathers images from afar but not the things themselves. Taken at face value, there is nothing unseen about media, whereas the icon is clearly the visible representation of things invisible; although they both stand for things not seen with the bare eye, the icon readily confirms it, while the screen disavows it. The novelty of Vallejo's fiction lies in claiming the mystified place of Colombia in contemporary global imagination –alas, not the land of the Sacred Heart but of gritty violence– and exacerbating it until the artifice itself becomes apparent.

A Theodicy of Misery

In terms of political theology, *Our Lady*'s fundamental critical intuition is that the global in media imagination is also a "secularized theological concept," analogous to those "significant concepts of the modern theory of the state" that Carl Schmitt had in mind in the 1920s (1985: 34). Colombia's relatively recent past proximity between State and Church affairs, and the living remnants thereof, have an underlying affinity with the operation of imagining, through the mediation of visual culture, a polity that extends itself beyond one's immediate surroundings. Note that theocracy was never Colombia's form of government: the Sacred Heart remained in the Constitution and as an image of social significance long past its expiration date, that is, decades after the heyday of its Catholic corporatist devotion had passed, *because the image gained a*

life of its own. It was without a doubt part of a simulacrum, a fundamental disconnection between the law and reality, between the written word and the world, between the image and the national subject. Similar disconnections underwrite the relations between local and global realms, which alternatively serve as the unreachable thing in itself that the other desires. Media cater to, yet do not fulfill, this desire.

Unlike Schmitt, for whom the object of political theology was the State, understood as a secularized form of God, in *Our Lady* the object of political theology is the poor, who as such constitute an incompletely secularized form of the demonic. For all the commingling of local and global audiences, be it under the unfavorable figure of the cowardly mob that congregates to see a murdered person but shies away from stepping in the way of the killer, in Fernando's discourse the poor remain as an irreducible, theological mystery. To some extent this is part of the novel's contradictions, as Fernando hates the poor in general but loves poor teenagers in particular, claims expertise on the *comunas* but has been there but once, and so forth.⁶⁴ However, at this point there emerge new inflammatory answers that exceed the frame of dislocation: the world does have a center, which is Medellín, and misery is the real of the global.

Such a *tour de force* requires a revelation, which interestingly takes the form of theodicy proper. As we have seen, Fernando's theological views are not consistent in the sense that he totters between praying, recanting, and blaspheming; he is consistent, however, in imbricating these religious postures with corresponding moments in the relation between media and the real, namely fascination, repulsion, and distortion. Thus, the first of three theodicies lies in buzzards, who Fernando claims have "la

⁶⁴ "¿Qué cómo sé tanto de las comunas sin haber subido? Hombre, muy fácil, como saben los teólogos de Dios sin haberlo visto [How do I know so much about the *comunas* without ever having gone up there? *Hombre*, it's easy, the same way theologians know about God without ever having seen him]" (61, 92-93).

propiedad de transmutar la carroña humana en el espíritu del vuelo [the attribute of transmuting human carrion into soaring spirit],” and as such are the finest proof he has of the existence of God (46-47, 48). As it later turns out, he assimilates buzzards to *paparazzi* by following a similar path of overdetermination as that observed in the case of the balloon/Sacred Heart imagery. Fernando explains that paparazzi means “parrots” in Italian, a name which suits the impertinent, “noisy” nature of journalists, but which falls short for those, arguably both national and foreign, who prey on Colombian violence and for whom the image of a buzzard is more suitable (44).

If buzzards and journalists mediate between the dead and the living, then the grammarian amounts to a foreign correspondent who writes from the land of the living dead. With his aleph-like switching of perspectives he places himself in a position from where he can look down on journalists, who, in turn, also look down on him. Regardless, Fernando too is a mediator, and a noisy one at that, as his persistent, sensationalist rant desires the real but thoroughly distorts it. For all its insistence on realist portrayal and the critical attention the novel has obtained from academics and reviewers along such lines, one needs just step back for a moment to appreciate how *Our Lady* is not realist. It is true that in reality and in the novel there were many dead; likewise, the public figures, dates, and places mentioned all have a correlate in actual events. But it is not the case that green-eyed gay hitmen could be randomly found in pairs or that they would both make friends with an aristocrat and not for a minute think about stealing from him, among many other far-fetched features that do not belong to a strictly realist frame, no matter how grippingly verisimilar Vallejo’s writing may be. In fact, the novel’s realism is best appreciated in its deviance, in the extent to which it misses its target.

The buzzard’s flight is an apt image for the way in which the novel courts the real. Buzzards fall from the sky in narrower circles until they reach dead meat, but they do

not fly directly to it. Similarly, the novel thematizes mediatic desire through theology, as every time it gets closer to a thanatic revelation which will provide the definitive confirmation that there is no hope, the destruction of all things sacred. The reader must however pass through a second theodicy to get there, as later in the novel Fernando comes across what he takes is a finer proof of the existence of God. After stating vehemently that God does not exist despite his efforts to locate Him by tuning in his “five senses plus the TV set,” Fernando backtracks and says that God exists *precisely* because God and the Devil are the same entity. It then becomes evident to him, upon seeing a child who lives in the street and is getting high by smelling glue (Sacol), that this “God” exists: “Cuando vi al niño oliendo el frasquito lo saludé con una sonrisa. Sus ojos, terribles, se fijaron en mis ojos, y vi que me estaba viendo el alma. Claro que Dios existe [When I saw the little lad sniffing from his little bottle, I greeted him with a smile. His terrifying eyes fixed on my eyes, and I saw he was seeing into my soul. Sure God exists]” (74, 80). This theodicy/diabodicy is thus constituted by one of the most pitiable images in *Our Lady*, and as such speaks volumes about the novel’s visual regime and its relation to (Christian) commiseration. If suffering, personified in the child, is the reality that television claims to deliver, then finally confronting it should lead to a revelation about the real, an injunction that clearly discriminates what is real from what is false, what is essential from what is accessory, as it were stopping time until the urgent is solved. And yet the world goes on, pity fixes its object into memory but little comes out of it.

“Claro que Dios existe” is then a sarcastic benchmark of the moment in the novel where every possibility of transcendence is lost. The collapse of the divine into the demonic makes way to a new kind of liminal space where the tensions between the local and the global are enveloped in angry resignation. This is the endpoint of a trajectory that began with an angelic global realm opposed to a marginalized,

criminalized national space (Colombia), but then relativized such positions, for “death travels faster than information.” As Third World violence can break into any home before there is time to turn off the television, both characters and addressees become “living dead”: hopeless, but as such fearless, creatures. This final turn towards immanence defines the world as a “valley of tears,” a common realm where misery rules. Existential void and more pedestrian concerns like, say, hunger, add up to the same. Medellín ends up being the proof that spleen is not ungrounded.

The third theodicy takes place within this frame. When Fernando breaks into the morgue as an “invisible man” he finds that the (green) eyes of Wílmár’s corpse refuse to close: “No se los pude cerrar por más que quise: volvían a abrírsele como mirando sin mirar, en la eternidad. Me asomé un instante a esos ojos verdes y vi reflejada en ellos, allá en su fondo vacío, la inmensa, la inconmensurable, la sobrecogedora maldad de Dios [I couldn’t close them however hard I tried: they kept opening as if staring, without seeing, into eternity. I peeped into those green eyes for an instant and saw reflected in them, there in their empty depths, the immense, incommensurable, overweening evil of God]” (119, 130). One may imagine that Fernando literally sees himself reflected in the eyes of the corpse, something that would liken him with God’s evil or with God himself. However, by this point in the novel it is clear that this new theodicy utterly empties out the space of revelation. All evil lies in the divine-satanic gaze, in the act of looking/reading, which is thus imbricated with staring at a corpse (a mirage of Christ’s heart torn out of his chest) and, finally, with watching TV: “mirar sin mirar [staring without seeing].”

The sacrificial horizon is surpassed, however, and death does not lead to resurrection nor to consolation: although Alexis has resurrected/reincarnated as Wílmár, Fernando has thrown the corpse of his first lover at the doctors of a private clinic and he walks out on the second corpse, leaving it unidentified at the morgue.

Significantly, abandoning sacrifice involves surpassing surrealism. When he sees the corpse of a baby left at random at the feet of the corpse of a grown up man, “orientado en sentido vertical como los brazos de una cruz [set at ninety degrees to it like the arms of a cross],” he compares it to a surrealist combination:

El hombre invisible recordó esas combinaciones de objetos mágicas, insólitas, con que soñaban los surrealistas, como por ejemplo un paraguas sobre una mesa de disección. ¡Surrealistas estúpidos! Pasaron por este mundo castos y puros sin entender nada de nada, ni de la vida ni del surrealismo. El pobre surrealismo se estrella en añicos contra la realidad de Colombia [The invisible man thought of those combinations of unwonted magic objects the Surrealists used to imagine, like an umbrella on a dissecting-table, for instance. Stupid Surrealists! They passed through this world chaste and pure without understanding anything about anything, neither about life nor about Surrealism. Faced with the reality of Colombia, a wretched Surrealism shatters into smithereens] (118, 129-130).

The passage at hand does not say that Colombian reality exceeds art tout court, but surrealism in particular. On one level, it serves as an *ars poetica*, a defense of a certain realist paradigm against the surrealism –or magical realism– of García Márquez, whose vitalist transfigurations of death are well known: in Vallejo, the corpse is the terminus of the narration of death.⁶⁵ On a different level, Fernando’s findings at the morgue, the last circle of hell in Fernández L’Hoeste’s analysis, assimilate the novel’s addressees as foreign tourists and voyeurs for whom surrealism cannot hold as a mode of experiencing the global. After the lengthy glide of the buzzard/paparazzi, it all comes down to an immanent, unidealized corpse whose eyes serves as a mirror, and yet there is nothing left to see but the hatred of God, the world as shambles.

⁶⁵ Likewise, the opening lines of *Our Lady* operate as an anti-*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, as they swiftly leave behind the idealized but existing village of Sabaneta, while García Márquez’s opening lines found the imaginary village of Macondo. Among other possible intertextual references, note that when Alexis shoots somebody in the forehead, he leaves “una cruz de ceniza” (38): this is reminiscent of the murder of the seventeen Aurelianos who are shot on their indelible Ash Wednesday marks.

Why does Fernando take it against surrealists at this point of the novel? The answer lies in surrealism's debts towards exoticism and primitivism, described by Louise Tythacott thus: "surrealists subsumed exotic cultures in romanticized imagery (...) they perpetuated notions of an essentialist, magical and dreamlike primitive world (197). Mutatis mutandis, a similar primitivist drive draws the Swiss to Colombia and Colombians themselves to the locus classicus of the sicario. In this sense, the novel erases its footsteps and adopts a self-critical position towards romanticizing sicariato in particular and, more broadly, Colombian violence –unlike derivative works like Barbet Schroeder's film adaptation of the book, for which Vallejo wrote the screenplay (2000), Jorge Franco's novel *Rosario Tijeras* (1997), or most blatantly its film adaptation by Emilio Maillé (2005). Through this rejection of surrealism, the novel strives to go beyond the limits of its medium, as if it were not the case that the primitive merely peeks into the comfort zone of art, but that the reader could truly leave this zone and inhabit "the primitive," the barren life of Fernando, two times a widower.

The novel also places itself beyond surrealism by being its continuation, that is, by actualizing it. As its French mainstream reception has observed, notably the magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* as cited in the back cover of the book's most recent reeditions, *Our Lady* echoes Isidore Ducasse's poetic novel *The Songs of Maldoror* (1869). Published under the infamous pen name of Comte de Lautréamont, the work had a key influence on surrealists, who admired the anti-heroic, evil character of Maldoror for his taboo-breaking exaltation of creativity. It belongs to a different study to explore in detail Vallejo's borrowings from Lautréamont; note, however, that Fernando can be seen as Maldoror "returning" to Medellín in the nineties to find not the morbid yet fantastic descriptions of Haussmann's Paris, but a daily life frequented by death. In this sense, Vallejo radicalizes Lautréamont's satanism by subjecting recent history to its transfor-

mative prism.⁶⁶ Other works also illustrate how the surrealist gesture is present in Vallejo's defiantly realist prose: think of the famous sequence in Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* (1929) where we watch Buñuel himself slitting an eye open in front of the camera, thus "transgressing" the spectator. [Fig. 18]

Apart from being part of the multiple evocations of differing social and geopolitical "perspectives" described, eyes and acts of seeing serve to enhance a sinister effect not unlike that of E.T.A. Hoffman's short story "The Sand Man," as analyzed by Freud in "The Uncanny" (1919). Instead of a recurring theme of a creature that throws sand at children's eyes or of wooden dolls with bleeding, human eyes, in *Our Lady* there are multiple eyes of either corpses or soon-to-be corpses, neither of which can ever be closed. Alexis actually demands to see his victim's eyes when he shoots; when asked if he does it so as not to kill treacherously, he replies matter-of-factly: "No hombre, por matar viendo los ojos [No, *hombre*, it's to kill looking straight into the victim's eyes]" (27, 24). Eerily, while the book establishes that such a choice is unrelated to any sort of warrior ethics or honor code, there is no further elaboration on a particular reason for doing it. Up to the final theodicy, looming eyes make their presence felt throughout: somebody is taking homeless beggars' eyes away for a university; sicarios cannot wipe from their minds the eyes of those who they have murdered (82); when Alexis lays dead in Fernando's arms (79),

⁶⁶ Corpses did flow down the Seine, although not in the novel's immediate past but a few decades back, during the cholera outbreak of 1831 and the massacres of 1848. In this sense, Lautréamont's pre-surrealist tales about seemingly absurd sightings of corpses in broad daylight evoked a suppressed past. Note how the Medellín river stands for the Seine: "Je n'envie rien au Créateur; mais, qu'il me laisse descendre le fleuve de ma destinée, à travers une série croissante de crimes glorieux" (VI,4). Among other meaningful passages, consider the moment when Maldoror brings a drowned man back to life (II) or when the adolescent Mervyn is almost killed after being mistaken for a dog (VI,6). The passage in *Our Lady* where Fernando shoots a dog to spare it from pain subverts Maldoror's admonition: "Homme, lorsque tu rencontres un chien mort retourné, appuyé contre une écluse qui l'empêche de partir, n'aïlle pas, comme les autres, prendre avec ta main, les vers qui sortent de son ventre gonflé, les considérer avec étonnement, ouvrir un couteau, puis en dépecer un grand nombre, en te disant que, toi, aussi, tu ne seras pas plus que ce chien. Quel mystère cherches-tu? (...) Lave tes mains, reprends la route qui va où tu dors..." (I).

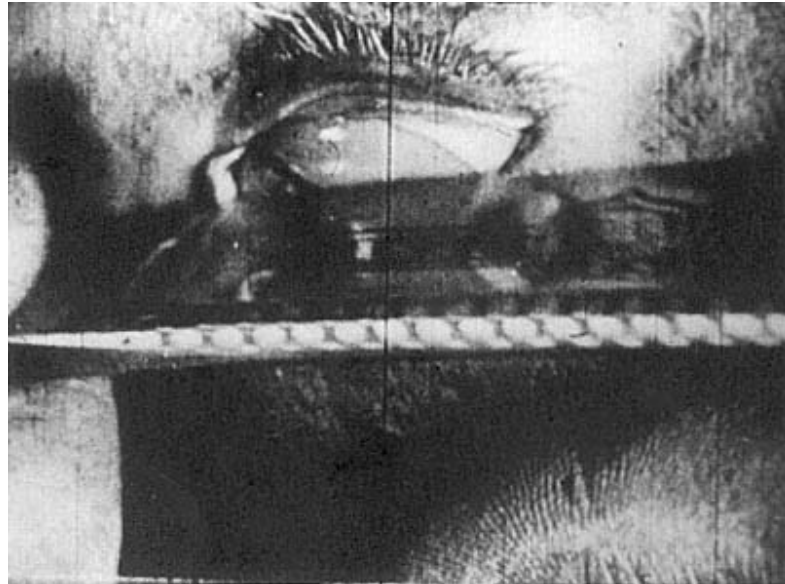


Figure 18: Still from Luis Buñuel's Un chien andalou (1929).

<http://content.cdlib.org/xtf/data/13030/fr/ft438nb2fr/figures/ft438nb2fr_00003.jpg>

the unclosable eyes of his corpse remind him of dolls whose eyelids would roll back open when one tries to close them, and that said “mamá” (42).

These images take us back to the question of the role of Virgin Mary in the novel’s reflections on visuality and the global. Under the sign of the Virgin, Vallejo conflates various kinds of mediation: that of Fernando, of the religious icon proper, of television, and of the book itself. Fernando’s suffering is initially figured in the Sacred Heart, but it turns more and more to the Virgin Mary, the defining moment in this trajectory being the above mentioned resemblance to a *mater dolorosa* and his attempt to bring Alexis back to life by calling him “my baby boy.”⁶⁷ Fernando’s idealized motherly love is never more distinct than in this *pietà*, but there are other ways of appreciating how he is not only the virgin of the assassins, but a virgin *among* them: he is the only one not to have pulled the trigger on any person in a novel that constantly intertwines eros and thanatos.⁶⁸ In a similar vein, shortly after Galán’s televised murder, Fernando cites in passing the verses by Antonio Machado that serve as the epigraph to the present chapter, and which, given their context in the novel, bind televisions and the eyes of the dead to the eye of the reader:

Y así, quién lo iba a creer, la última palabra que dijo el vivo fue “ven”, como pueden ver volviendo a ver su frase. Nunca más vio. A estos muertos se les quedan los ojos abiertos sin ver. Y ojos que no ven, aunque uno los vea, no son ojos, como atinadamente observó el poeta Machado, el profundo [And that way, who’d have believed it, the last word he said in life was ‘see’, as you can see by going back over his words. Well, he saw nothing more. All dead men have left is their open but unseeing eyes. And eyes that don’t see, although one might see them, are not eyes, as that profoundest of poets Machado wisely observed] (41, 41).

⁶⁷ Similarly, Jean Franco claims that Fernando “takes on the role of the permissive mother.” (2002: 225) The critic studies the novel as an instance of a certain *costumbrismo* of globalization, alongside with Paulo Lins *Cidade de Deus* (1997).

⁶⁸ “Le desplegué por todo Junín un tendal de muertos. Me sentía como Don Juan presumiéndole a Don Luis de las mujeres que se había echado [I painted the picture for him of a trail of dead bodies all over Junín. I felt like Don Juan showing off to Don Luis about all the women he’d had]” (24, 21).

Once again, Vallejo's aleph invites the reader to fancy impossible perspectives, but this time there is one that escapes even the space of impossibility, a perspective that is no more: that of the corpse. The reader may relate to Fernando and mother a corpse, take care of it, attempt to bring it back to life –a wish that is actually granted when Wílmor comes into the narration to “substitute” Alexis– but he or she will never take the place of the dead. The same lack of reciprocity in the gaze exists in television and in reading, where one sees but is not seen, and, if the novel's ideals of immanence and materialism are to prevail, in the adoration of the religious icon. Corpses in the morgue remind Fernando of polychrome saints; according to the novel's metaphysics, the opposite is just as plausible. In other words, the Virgin of Sabaneta is a wooden doll that looks down from atop an altar, but that does not see: her eyes are not eyes.

Consider under this light Machado's poem “Arde en tus ojos,” from *Soledades* (1899-1907), which, although not mentioned in *Our Lady*, elucidates its visual regime:

Arde en tus ojos un misterio, virgen
esquiva y compañera.

No sé si es odio o es amor la lumbre
inagotable de tu aljaba negra.

Conmigo irás mientras proyecte sombra
mi cuerpo y quede a mi sandalia arena.

-¿Eres la sed o el agua en mi camino?
Dime, virgen esquiva y compañera. (65)

[A mystery burns in your eyes, virgin/ elusive and companion//
I do not know if it is hatred or love the fire/ inexhaustible of
your black quiver.//You will come with me as long as there
cast shadow/ my body and there remain sand to my
sandal.//Are you thirst or water in my path?/Tell me, virgin
elusive and companion.]

As the Virgin will not accompany the poetic voice past its death, that is, after ceasing to cast a shadow or to step on this earth, the poem is the lament of the post-believer, who is ambivalently chased by the hatred or nourished by the love of the sacred.⁶⁹ The dumbfounding image of the black quiver in the second stanza assimilates the Virgin to Diana, the Hunter, but also her eyes to repositories of arrows; the hollow space of the quiver, womblike, is death itself. And yet, if Virgins are but wooden dolls, the fire in their eyes lies not there, nor beyond, but internalized as the unflinching “thirst” of the subject. The piercing eyes of the icon stand as markers of the former devotee’s inner struggle.

Such observations allow us to further our understanding of how the Virgin of the Hitmen is to occupy the place of the Sacred Heart, and ultimately how *Our Lady of the Assassins* does. Within the national space, replacing one icon with the other amounts to unmasking the conflicts at work behind an image that purportedly celebrated the harmonious unity of a nation under God. CIPHERING the Virgin of Sabaneta as a new national emblem is an act of provocation not only because she was the matron of *sicarios*, but because Marian devotion includes a larger part of Colombian society. Within a global realm, the Virgin of the Hitmen could not quite represent, as the Sacred Heart did among 19th century Catholics, “God’s love for mankind,” but an immanent, materialist hatred among humans. We established above how, in the novel, the mediation of television is also figured by the religious icon. Along these lines, television would be a surrealist technology for expiation at the global level, and a failed one at it. Thus, *Our Lady* volunteers as a global emblem and as a literary catalyst to unmask the love-hate gaze present in the mediation of the global through television. In short, it posits the Swiss as devotees of a cult of misery.

⁶⁹ For a more orthodox reading that identifies “virgin” with “maiden,” and consequently sees the poem as a love poem, see Lauxar. Vallejo’s “pansatanism” subverts Machado’s pantheism. On the latter, see Baker.

A Civil War on Drugs

Josefina Ludmer once observed that *Facundo* was “la primera catedral de la literatura argentina” (qtd. in Sorensen 13). Her choice of words reminds us of how recent and incomplete the secularization of the literary is: books congregate people and what they hold most dear, even sacred; they harbor a variety of cult-like activities (which, after Aira’s depiction of the international circuit of literary conferences in *El Congreso de Literatura*, would occasionally involve a sing-along). Borrowing Ludmer’s terms, could *Our Lady* be a cathedral of Colombian literature? And of a new, hypercanonical, global literature?

Rather, I would venture that Vallejo’s novel is the last cathedral of global literature. Not because it celebrates dispersion instead of congregation: despite what Fernando’s many months of aimless wondering from one church to another may suggest, the novel’s deep-rooted allegiance to 19th century European novel, represented in figures like Proust, Lautréamont, and Balzac, and to the Colombian national canon (García Márquez, Zalamea Borda, Mejía Vallejo) offer the coordinates to situate it squarely within a tradition.⁷⁰ *Our Lady* is the last cathedral because it does not observe the obvious hierarchy of the metaphor: it is more of a neighborhood parish which nonetheless holds a claim to Peter’s throne. In this respect, it captures a moment in time, a configuration of the global that will not repeat itself: the days when the war on drugs was won, revealed itself as a simulacrum, and still left many dead behind. The days when Medellín was the center of the world, or so it seemed, for all the wrong reasons.

⁷⁰ Zalamea Borda’s *Cuatro años a bordo de mí mismo* (1934) introduced internal monologue to Colombia. On the relationship with Mejía Vallejo, see Corbatta.

Lander has claimed that the reader of *Our Lady* becomes entangled in an “intellectual’s criminal discourse” that leads to fancy criminals and intellectuals together, “within inferior spaces of society” (83). Whereas her argument rightly shows how this leads to criticizing local elites and to revealing “the hidden violence of the nation building processes,” after the present analysis one may understand this contiguity within a model of glocalized immanence determined by a dual religious-mediatic visual regime. We may thus extrapolate Lander’s conclusion for a global audience: “The originality of Vallejo’s project, and what explains its polemical nature, is that *he blurs the lines that separate the civilized and the barbarian*, the author and the instigator, the writer and the assassins; it is all part of the same continuum, different manifestations of the same violence” (87; my emphasis). In the terms discussed above, the Swiss, too, are instigators and barbarians –let alone potential cocaine consumers.

Behind *Our Lady*’s unfair caricature of the Swiss, made extensive among others to “un japonesito [a nice Japanese man],” lies the *mundo al revés* or topsy-turvy world of “el país más criminal de la tierra [the most criminal country on Earth]” looking down on nationalities that are usually favorably portrayed. Through this inversion, the novel inquires about the grammar of the negatively-charged name “Colombia” in the global imagination and about the place that the country occupies in the epic tale of the war on drugs. Indeed, Colombia’s marginal position in the world is such that Galán’s assassination will not go down in history as, say, Robert Kennedy’s, while Pablo Escobar’s infamous legend can in fact rival that of Al Capone. To envisage Medellín in the early nineties as the place where the Hell of the world could be found is not a particularly huge leap of the imagination in the sense that, as Schmitt claims, there is a structural identity between “the metaphysical image of the world a particular age creates” and “the form of a political organization” (1985: 46). The war on drugs is just

one such political “organization,” and *Our Lady*’s hell on earth responds to its corresponding metaphysical image of the world.

Our Lady does not spell out an argument against the war on drugs or espouse any sensible alternative such as, in Paul Gootenberg’s words, “domesticating” the consumption of cocaine in first world markets (xiii). Nor does it question that the cause against drugs should be furthered by waging war in a faraway land, and not, say, by restricting bank secrecy in more metropolitan locations. Nonetheless, the novel is about the war on drugs in the sense that, through its satanic tale, it exacerbates the mystifying role that global media play in it, while Fernando’s angry discourse showcases and caricatures the social disarray that both predates and results from Colombian *carteles*. Cocaine, however, remains by and large an absent signifier, with rare exceptions such as the assertion that money from the drug trade paid for the many noisy taxis in the city, which as such embody the crucial role of cocaine in local economy and city life, as well as representing a “hell-wide system of exchange,” that is, the flow of illegal capital at a global level.

Whereas the novel seldom mentions cocaine but brings to life a world that revolves around the substance, it often mentions the poor, who take the larger toll of the war on drugs, but it does so in such a way that they remain otherworldly. After *Our Lady*’s denouement “everybody” is a foreign tourist, and as such a voyeur, for all there is to see is corpses. The bottom line then is something like “why bother living if we will all die in the end, be it by gunshot in Medellín or of old age in Switzerland.” Should the hungry fast, then? As the poor are never among Fernando’s many addressees, but often stand as the object of his discourse, the novel ultimately reconstitutes two not only separate but incommensurable realms: that of angelic “subjects,” defined by literati, First world citizens and affluent locals, and that of demonic “objects,” defined by criminals, corpses, and paupers. Fernando often

describes Alexis and Wílmor using epithets that, like “Exterminating Angel,” summoning their contradictory role as divine demons whose eyes do not see. As such they are untenable, and must die. Consequently, Fernando’s sexual acts with them transgress an almost cosmological order, and are thus described either as the contemplation of divine, naked bodies or dismissed as “pornographic details” left out of the narration. In the tragic outcome, both lover boys assume their places as gruesome corpses, and the cosmological (pessimistic) order of things is restored.

Not surprisingly, this ending, in addition to Fernando’s discourse, has prompted critics to say in more or less straightforward ways that the novel is fascist (Polit, O’Bryan). These readings conflate the book’s aporetic exploration of contradiction with its provocative resolution. Neither the character Fernando, nor the author Vallejo in his public appearances, would openly disavow fascist views, but the very fact that they espouse them within literary contexts should indicate that their task is provocation and not propaganda. What is troubling is precisely the extent to which readers may find themselves identified with parts of the discourse –as for instance counting on another’s misery to appreciate personal well-being. Through such interpellations, the novel calls for ethical and political fine-tuning in regards to easy homologation between views on gender, religion, class, and so forth. As epitomized by the coexistence of Fernando’s fascist views and his openly gay sexuality in conservative Antioquia, *Our Lady* portrays polemical positions in different ideological spectra, but just not the ones that most often go hand in hand in real life. The resulting jarring effect not only places Fernando in a demographic all of his own, but demands of the reader to think through the issues at hand.

Our Lady, like its morbid buzzards, “elevates reality into high art,” but like Fernando, does so self-critically. The novel strives to go beyond the simulacrum of the paparazzi towards staring reality, finally, in the eyes, but there is nothing left to see

other than the act of looking itself. Note, however, that *readers are not “looking,” they are reading that they are looking.* The book in this sense is more akin to a treatise on theology than to the miracle itself; it thematizes the impossibility of witnessing. Lenin’s remark that “theology is a subject without an object” (qtd. in Eagleton 42) fittingly describes Vallejo’s political theology of misery, except that the latter’s endeavor assumes its impossibility and delves into its constitutive dialectics. Moreover, although ultimately both are going to miss the real, it favors literature over the image by having literature reveal the gap between global media and the world. Indeed, Vallejo’s very language puts on trial the unspoken dogma of contemporary global media that “seeing is believing,” that is, that the image shows the way to the truth, for actually seeing may stand in the way of comprehending.

We may thus regard Vallejo as a radical thinker of the global if under radicalism we understand, along with Baudrillard, a thought-provoking mystification (as opposed to “elucidation”) of meaning through poetic language. As the material medium of thought that Baudrillard had in mind, *Our Lady*’s language is joyous, life-affirming, even when its subject matter is poignantly grim.⁷¹ In this sense, Fernando is a peculiar grammarian whose goal is to render things more unintelligible than he found them. This involves mystifying televised images of the global through written language, a sensible task when one considers the naturalized, uncritical gaze at them that has come to be the rule. But should Vallejo not be a more consequent realist and “set the record straight”? Since that precisely is the rhetoric of journalism, his option is to radicalize the simulacrum by turning mediatic demonization into the demonic proper. All along, he transfigures language not only by introducing the novel’s addressees to *parlache*,

⁷¹ “La résolution du sens est là, dans la forme même, dans la matérialité formelle de l’expression. Le sens, lui, est toujours malheureux, l’analyse est par définition malheureuse, puisqu’elle est née de la désillusion critique. Mais la langue, elle, est heureuse, même si elle désigne un monde sans illusion et sans espoir. Ce serait, même là, la définition d’une pensée radicale: une intelligence sans espoir, mais une forme heureuse” (29-30).

that is, the slang from the *comunas*, but also by inscribing this vernacular into literary history.

Clearly, in *Our Lady*'s reflection about the global, thinking religion through media and media through religion plays an important part. But does this religion need be Catholicism? There is a common thread to the aleph as a cognitive metaphor, to global media, and to Catholicism, which is the *complexio oppositorum*, the complex of opposites. In Schmitt's words, "there appears to be no antithesis [Catholicism] does not embrace" (1996: 7). If the same is true about global media, and television is indeed a household fixture that performs the consolatory function of the icon, then we should consider Schmitt's insights about the stakes of *complexio*:

The union of antitheses extends to the ultimate socio-psychological roots of human motives and perceptions. The pope is called the Father; the Church is the Mother of Believers and the Bride of Christ. This is a marvelous union of the patriarchal and the matriarchal, able to direct both streams of the most elemental complexes and instincts –respect for the father and love for the mother– toward Rome. Has there ever been a revolt against the mother? (1996: 8)

Where is Medellín's Rome? Instead of dealing with this crucial question opened by its Catholic/mediatic visual regime, the novel's unyielding nostalgic drive laments the lack of a "real" center of power and meaning, and plunges into the absence of future.⁷² After thoroughly revolting against the mother and disrupting the union of the patriarchal and the matriarchal, this final pessimistic turn leads to a reactionary state of orphanhood. The novel's addressees may share in this bleakness and be leveled by it, but as in reality there are no alephs but actual sites of enunciation, trading Christian commiseration for generalized secular hopelessness puts a veil over the power

⁷² Fernando's suicidal, no-hope stance echoes Víctor Gaviria's pivotal film *Rodrigo D: no futuro* (1990), which finds inspiration in De Sica's neorealist *Umberto D.* (1952). For a study of various films and works of fiction that deal with *sicariato* and life in the *comunas*, see Jácome.

relations at play. Such a position brings us closer to Leo XIII, who thought that the right to happiness was a socialist fallacy. Politically, the step ahead would be to imagine a liminality between the global and the local different from that of being undead in Medellín. Perhaps this is the task of the real life readers who approach *Our Lady* in the high schools and public libraries of the *comunas* and beyond.

If along with Mondzain we understand iconocracy as an “organization of the visible which provokes a belief” (*Hypatia* 59), then we may appreciate how, in an iconocratic sense, the novel falls short of developing the full potential of its satanic subversion of the gaze. But how could one “disorganize” the visible so as to challenge the belief in the war on drugs, as entrenched as it is in a surrealist-exoticist understanding of the global and despite the pain caused in its name? Possibly, this question exceeds the frame of Vallejo’s project, which focuses on the small, invisible narrative of a wandering intellectual and the faceless minions of a disbanding cartel, instead of on the grand televised narrative of the ongoing war. Let us then conclude with an even smaller, if telling, narrative. One person says to another, “The war on drugs is over.” Stunned, the latter asks: “Really? Who won?” And the former replies: “Drugs!”

CHAPTER 4

NAZI TALES FROM LATIN AMERICA

Nazism figures as an unlikely backdrop for various “retro” detective stories written in the 1990s in Latin America and as an integral part of the reflections carried out in several works of fiction, among them *Literatura nazi en América* (1996, trans. *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, 2008) by Roberto Bolaño, *En busca de Klingsor* (1999, trans. *In Search of Klingsor*, 2002) by Jorge Volpi, and *Amphitryon* by Ignacio Padilla (2000, trans. *Shadow without a Name*, 2003). “Nazism” as portrayed in such works is not quite German National Socialism; it is less of a political party or ideology than it is a term that, although not completely removed from its historical meaning, often stands for something else. Why should “Nazism,” among all possible signifiers to convey authoritarianism or vileness, be invoked by Latin American writers at the turn of the 21st century? What to make of the gap between such fictional Nazisms and the historical phenomenon? This chapter offers an answer to these questions by showing how a pop-culture rendering of Nazism acts as a prism that, on the one hand, allows texts to conceive, through various counterfactual scenarios, alternative models of globalization, and on the other, allows Latin American literature to re-think its place in the world.

The Parallel Reality of Global Fascism

“Nazism” in Latin American literature has its most prominent proponent in Roberto Bolaño. *Nazi Literature in the Americas* is not only the first major text in the

period to gesture towards Nazism, but it is also a source of inspiration for the works that follow, as Ignacio Padilla observed in a conversation with the author of this dissertation (Dec. 31, 2007). Indeed, Bolaño opened up a space of possibility with the somewhat heretical initiative of claiming the centrality of Nazism in a global collective imaginary. The negative baggage of the term came along as well; consequently, for a book that has “Nazi” in its title, Bolaño uses the word sparingly, as the empty center around which revolve all actions and characters, even when they are not Nazi in a conventional sense.

Nazi Literature reads as an encyclopedia of imaginary authors with heterogeneous right-wing tendencies: it is composed of a series of cross-listed entries that narrate, in a mock erudite tone, the bio-bibliographies of over thirty characters. A fictionalized history of the long 20th century ends up taking shape as their lives span several decades and take place in various continents. The dean of these characters, socialite writer and arts patron Edelmira Thompson de Mendiluce, is born in Buenos Aires in 1894 and dies in the same city at the age of ninety-nine after having spent extensive periods of time traveling through seemingly endless destinations that include Europe, the Aegean sea, Jerusalem, Damascus, and Baghdad. Similarly wandering lives distinguish most characters of the book, and even project themselves into the future: the cadet of the group, land-artist-of-sorts and diplomat Willy Schürholz, is born in Chile in 1956 and dies in Uganda in 2029.

Clearly, Bolaño’s goal is to trace a constellation. In addition to itinerancy and extremist political views, most characters share a peculiar passion for literature that borders on fascination, and, strikingly, rage. A few have a direct involvement in violent acts, such as Carlos Ramírez Hoffman, a military pilot who is also a former torturer for the Pinochet regime and a poet, while most do not pass beyond venting bigotry through their poetry. It appears then that among the organizing principles of

the encyclopedia, one may find the ideas that literature itself is a matter of life or death, and that literature is a space where people take sides as they would during a war. The encyclopedia operates, as it were, in a double helix: it uses Nazism to deconstruct the assumed sanctity and autonomy of the literary space (the “ivory tower”), while at the same time it portrays Nazism as something that takes hold of the everyday, stays much too alive, and lies closer than one may think –if under different garbs.

The places that the entries on Schürholz and Ramírez Hoffman occupy within the book’s monstrous constellation illustrate such a procedure. Whereas, in the first chapters of the book, several members of the Mendiluce family have met Hitler himself, after Schürholz we find characters such as Rory Long, a Christian preacher, whose sole involvement with Nazism is writing a humoristic poem in which Leni Riefenstahl makes love with Ernst Jünger as they both approach one hundred years of age, an event laconically described as “un entrechocar de huesos y de tejidos muertos” (142). Schürholz marks a turning point located roughly halfway along an overarching, gradual decline of personal involvement with Nazism that comes to completion in Ramírez Hoffman, whose only connections to Nazism are belonging to the book’s compendium and the fact that a mad man, “el loco Norberto,” sees his military aircraft in the distant skies and swears it is a Messerschmitt from the Luftwaffe (181). The pilot occupies the place of honor in a book where, like in its obvious antecedent *Historia universal de la infamia* (1935, trans. *A Universal History of Infamy* 1972) by Jorge Luis Borges, honor and infamy change places: his life is the very “heart of darkness,” the last complete entry –after which only scattered mini bio-bibliographical references follow– and, as such, the final point in a trajectory that has involved lengthy preparation.

The overall effect of such a trajectory is that Nazism seems to disseminate through space and over time, but also, paradoxically, to be all the more present and global. In turn, this results in a tragicomic tension between a “concentrated” rendering of pure Nazism (read “evil”) and a dispersed, de-centralized, multifocal Nazism which is always on the verge of becoming something utterly unrelated to the ideology that goes under that name. Whereas both extremes are caricatures, one may find between them several instances where, by approximating Nazism to different cultural formations, significant aspects of the latter come to light. *Nazi Literature* is deceitfully simple: at one level, it can be read as a collection of numerous, loosely connected stories, rich in anecdotal value, that entertain with their fluid alternation of dramatism and comic relief –presumably, the very qualities that underpin the book’s editorial success, most recently, in the U.S. market.⁷³ At another level, it offers a powerful reflection on how political and aesthetic idea(l)s travel, as well as a pointed, if veiled, cultural critique of phenomena that range from 19th century criollismo to neo-avant-garde Chilean art, passing through Beat poetry and profitable stadium-filling new religions. Like Tlön’s encyclopedia in Borges’s famous short story, the book’s ambition is no less than being an (idiosyncratic) encyclopedia of a parallel world.⁷⁴ The uncertain totality traced by the book’s entries constitutes a peculiar “mundo al revés” or topsy-turvy world.

⁷³ Sarah Pollack finds, particularly in regards to *The Savage Detectives*, that editorial houses sell Bolaño as “a nostalgic memento for U.S. readers evoking the rebellion and counterculture of the 60s and 70s.” (8)

⁷⁴ “En el amarillo lomo de cuero leí estas curiosas palabras que la falsa carátula repetía: *A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön. Vol. XI. Hlaer to Jangr*. No había indicación de fecha ni de lugar. En la primera página y en una hoja de papel de seda que cubría una de las láminas en colores había estampado un óvalo azul con esta inscripción: Orbis Tertius. Hacía dos años que yo había descubierto en un tomo de cierta enciclopedia práctica una somera descripción de un falso país; ahora me deparaba el azar algo más precioso y más arduo. Ahora tenía en las manos un vasto fragmento metódico de la historia total de un planeta desconocido, con sus arquitecturas y sus barajas, con el pavor de sus mitologías y el rumor de sus lenguas, con sus emperadores y sus mares, con sus minerales y sus pájaros y sus peces, con su álgebra y su fuego, con su controversia teológica y metafísica. Todo ello articulado, coherente, sin visible propósito doctrinal o tono paródico.” (“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” 1941). As Bolaño, Borges has recourse to anachronism, as he dates the section “postscript” in 1947, even though the complete short story appeared in *Sur* in 1940 and in *El Jardín de los Senderos que se Bifurcan* in 1941. Both authors mention other real-life figures, in Borges’s case, most notably, Bioy Casares.

Bolaño's imagined world is not always fantastic or removed from actual events. While their actions may seem outlandish, many of the book's characters are loosely based on actual people. *That they are* is arguably secondary to *how they are*, as their stories playfully subvert the events that they are based on and which are seldom mentioned by name. Consider the case of Schürholz, an experimental poet who achieves international notoriety through "abstract" works that combine verse with drawings of the maps of concentration camps. Bolaño sets the birthplace of the imaginary poet in a rural settlement in the south of Chile founded by exiled Germans called "Colonia Renacer." The author models this domain on the real-life "Colonia Dignidad," a hamlet close to Parral founded in 1961 by Paul Schäfer, a former Luftwaffe paramedic. Schäfer was the leader of a cult-like organization that functioned as an autarkic State within the Chilean State and where Chilean citizens were actually tortured as a result of a secret pact with Pinochet's regime (García). A real-life Schürholz would have been Schäfer's potential victim too, for he sexually abused many children who were under his de facto authority. Contrastingly, the narrator suggests that Schürholz's work, written in Santiago, represents his desire to return to an idyllic childhood.⁷⁵ In a similar way, throughout Bolaño's fictional encyclopedia entries, perversion is the rule that informs the characters' creative endeavors.

Bolaño examines the rule from the exception and vice versa, flirting with perspectivism and moral relativism as he imagines situations which more or less closely resemble actual events that, despite their actuality, would strike most as unreal. The narrator observes that the Colonia turns its back on what Chileans "tal vez en un exceso de optimismo" call "realidad chilena," or reality tout court (94), whereas in real

⁷⁵ Schürholz's last published work is a children's book that appeared under the pen name "Gaspar Hauser." Hauser was a famous lost boy who could barely speak when he was found in Nuremberg in 1828. His life has inspired numerous works since, such as Paul Verlaine's *Sagesse* (1881) and Werner Herzog's film *Jeder für Sich und Gott Gegen Alle* (1974).

life it is the majority of Chileans, as well as a more general public, who turn their back on abnormalities like the Colonia. Indeed, the gradual revelations surrounding Colonia Dignidad told the story of a conspiracy theory of international implications proven correct; similarly, *Nazi Literature* tells multiple tales that delineate a climate of fear, the threat of an imaginary, latent global conspiracy that somehow involves Nazism and carries on well into the 21st century. Whereas one of the intended effects of such storytelling is then an admonition, for and about literati, on the potential persistence of fascist ideals through literature, such persistence can only be understood in a global framework that may conceive of displacements of meaning across national traditions and temporalities.

Nazi Literature portrays the nature of such global transactions as problematic: it is a book unfit for enthusiasts of globalization, as most things that travel from one place to another are (proto-)fascist; at the same time, its rhizomic narrative structure challenges readers of an anti-globalization persuasion, or simply, those who might expect the Latin American author to stick to Latin American subjects. Tension between global and local realms, as well as between historicity and utter de-contextualization, surfaces in the references covered by the encyclopedia, be they imaginary poems, novels, biographies, or performances: all are unsteady, hard-to-pin-down objects, unsettling both in artistic and in ideological terms. Consequently, Schürholz's works are not explicitly fascist, as that would make them unlikely to take part in mainstream literary and artistic circuits. On the contrary –hence the element of perversion– they are described as plausible works that, given a certain context, one could actually see as *critical* of the events that took place in the Colonia.

As the imaginary reviewers mentioned in the entry, the reader could easily identify Schürholz's actions as risqué, moving interventions: in the chef d'oeuvre of a series, he has excavators dig into the sand of the Atacama desert the map of an "ideal

concentration camp”: “una ominosa sucesión de líneas rectas [que] observada a vuelo de helicóptero o aeroplano se convierte en un juego grácil de líneas curvas [an ominous series of straight lines [that] viewed from a helicopter or an airplane resolved into a graceful set of curves]” (97-98, 96).⁷⁶ He then adds the “literary component” by inscribing the vowels in random places of the map with a hoe and a mattock. As a real-life work of art, such a performance could provide a powerful commentary, to name but a few possibilities, on the assimilation of fascist ideals by Southern Cone dictators, on how blind love for Order as an end in itself can lead to condoling social “cleansing” and arm-chair murder, on the contrast between industrialized genocide (the excavators) and the manual hoe-and-mattock labor of individual crime. The map of the camp, with the childish vowels superposed, spells a basic grammar for a language of destruction, where culture, intrinsically linked to agriculture, succumbs to a muted action that represents the sowing of death.

Any speculations along those lines could hold true for Bolaño’s description of these actions within the book’s *mise en abyme*, and yet they would not be true about Schürholz’s actions themselves. The latter are the result of the land artist/poet’s heartfelt desire to see the order of the concentration camp take over Chile; nonchalantly, he throws in some vowels so as to retain a measure of artistic respectability before his fascist fantasies reveal themselves to their full extent. The point of the *mise en abyme* is less to invite a debate about artistic intentionality than to bring about a certain tension between works of art and their contexts, broadly understood as historical determinations. The ethics and aesthetics of deploying imagery related to the Holocaust in such a way that ends up celebrating it through awe are subjects that have been discussed for decades: Bolaño steps into this discussion in a moment when it pertains to a broadly transnational context that for better or for

⁷⁶ I cite Chris Andrews’s translation.

worse weaves in together historical referents that are more distant or closer in the past and that come from diverse geographical and socio-political coordinates (Larsen 2001).

One could hastily assume that Bolaño is likening Nazism to Pinochetism or assimilating State crime under Latin American dictatorships to the Holocaust. Whereas the book does not foreclose such historically flattening readings, it goes to great lengths to explore transhistorical resonances in their complexity, including their insurmountable dissonance. Given the author's situation, so often thematized in his writings, as a Chilean expatriate in Europe, when Bolaño looks back in time he finds unavoidable, albeit problematic, to conceive of Nazism except through the prism of Pinochetism and vice versa. Thus, his encyclopedia can be seen as an attempt to answer the question of what the artist is to do when events of local and of global import are connected in the imagination. Along such lines, the book offers a space where Nazism and Pinochetism, but also various other phenomena, as we will address briefly later on, regard each other in a relationship that can be best described as "perverse gravitation." In terms of the metaphor, the black sun that holds the system together is Evil, an abstract, vague, and questionably ahistorical concept to which all entries in one way or the other orient themselves. That Evil and genocides-of-all-times should coincide acritically in occupying this absent center of infamy would be the least compelling aspect of Bolaño's literary project. Be this as it may, the truly powerful features of *Nazi Literature* are the way in which it brings about a dynamic image of a totality in constant transformation and its enquiry on the role of art in regard to such an ungraspable totality.

While transformation plays an important role in tracing these dynamics, as, for instance, when we see Nazism and Nazi art "mutate" into other political and esthetical forms, so does anachronism: the book frequently actualizes critical discussions from

different epochs and sites of enunciation and makes them coexist in its narrative present. The result of this operation is a certain uneven pastiche whose constitutive elements are constantly at odds with each other, and where conflict between aesthetic and political ideals prevails. Schürholz's imaginary critics take part in this conflict by insisting on domesticating the poet's works in a peculiar act of framing the fascist from the point of view of the self-declared non-fascist –and, naively, by becoming complicit in fascism. A notable historical antecedent and an inverted mirror-image to such an act of framing is the infamous Nazi exhibition of “Entartete Kunst,” degenerate art, which assembled in Munich in 1937 key artists of European modernism such as Chagall, Kandinsky, Dix, Grosz, and Ernst, into a hall of shame, a freak show, which was to clear the public's palate so they could acquire a taste for heroic, sanitized, edifying, grand Nazi art (Barron). But what constitutes an exhibition of the degenerate, the works themselves or the way they are presented? In a naturalized Nazi horizon, this would be a chicken and egg question, whereas from a non-Nazi “perspective” it is obvious that the “degenerate” falls on the side of the act of framing. Bolaño imagines a space between these mutually exclusive positions. In this way, Schürholz's inverted exhibition of the degenerate actualizes the idea that the very autonomy of art is a field of confrontation that extends itself globally.

Nazi Literature is a freak show of a book where fascism shapes art around the world under the figure of the residual. Thus, considering the residual as such is key to understanding how *Nazi Literature* constructs a certain negative of globalization. Alberto Moreiras observes that the force of reactionary thought lies in its holding onto the residual while denying its residual condition: “[el pensamiento reaccionario] vive en el residuo en negación del residuo, en negación de la calidad residual del residuo [reactionary thought inhabits the residue in negation of the residue, in negation of the residual quality of the residue]” (2003: 8). In these terms, reactionary thought is a

category that fittingly describes the varied political beliefs that the book organizes around Nazism. But why would Bolaño offer a sounding chamber for reactionary ideals? The entry on Willy Schürholz suggests that he does so to restore historicity even if, or perhaps because, the medium is fiction, and *comical* fiction in particular. Bolaño coincides with Moreiras, who further claims that “no podemos librarnos de la razón reaccionaria sin arriesgar en ello una total pérdida de historicidad [we cannot get rid of reactionary reason without risking a total loss of historicity]” (9). In different registers, both authors position themselves at the crossroads of utopia, which, pace Moreiras, “narrativizes,” and as such suspends historicity, and history itself. Bolaño’s imaginative counterfactual scenarios do not put in place a properly reactionary reason, but they summon it to bear upon the present, to offer the necessary counterpoint for there to be historicity in a given temporal horizon, that is, the nineties, which after the end of the Cold War, and the advent of globalization as we know it, often fancied itself as ahistorical or posthistorical.⁷⁷

Bolaño invokes the reactionary in political, as well as in literary and aesthetic imagination, through what we could describe as “partial inversions.” The entry on Willy Schürholz, which reveals many aspects of the book’s *ars poetica*, toys with the possibility that the nightmare of Colonia Dignidad could be somebody’s dream, or that Schürholz’s idealized Heimat were actually “la realidad” and we, who are outside, were unreal. It is less a matter of perspectivism –the idea that one person’s utopia could be another person’s hell– than of historicity and *Realpolitik*⁷⁸, as utopias do turn into hells, and conspiracies into history: for years, Colonia Dignidad was thought a

⁷⁷ A position epitomized in Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992).

⁷⁸ Bolaño hints toward *Realpolitik* when his alter ego accepts a deal to lead a bounty hunter to a criminal poet: “Le dije que para mí Ramírez Hoffman era un criminal, no un poeta. Bueno, bueno, dijo él, tal vez para Ramírez Hoffman o para cualquier otro usted no sea poeta o sea un mal poeta y él o ellos sí. Todo depende, ¿no cree? Cuánto me va a pagar, le dije. Así me gusta, dijo él, directo al grano” (192-193).

promised land that offered nearby residents access to employment, elementary education, and other resources (García). Dismissing such events as residual, precisely, allows them to flourish –hence Bolaño’s fantastic rendering is called “Renacer.”

Let us examine under this light the last entry in the compilation, where the only residue of Nazism is the mirage of a Messerschmitt –perhaps not coincidentally, the plane that would bomb Guernica a few months before the exhibition in Munich. Carlos Ramírez Hoffman’s entry is linked to Schürholz’s by what the book describes as an aesthetic affinity and a genealogical relationship: “en algunos círculos se le considera el único discípulo del enigmático y desaparecido Ramírez Hoffman, aunque el joven de la Colonia Renacer carece de la desmesura de aquél [in certain circles he was considered the only disciple of the enigmatic, vanished Ramírez Hoffman, although the young man from Colonia Renacer lacked the master’s excess]” (97, 95). Such cross-referencing serves the purposes of building suspense, as the reader wonders what kind of perverse greatness is Ramírez Hoffman’s such that he might succeed where Schürholz fails: “sus promotores, entusiasmados, le ofrecen una avioneta para realizar un campo de concentración en el cielo pero Schürholz se niega: sus campos ideales *deben* observarse desde el cielo, pero sólo pueden ser dibujados en la tierra. Una vez más la oportunidad de emular y superar a Ramírez Hoffman se ha perdido [eager promoters wanted to find him a light plane so he could draw a concentration camp in the sky, but he refused: his ideal camps were meant to be observed from the sky, but they could only be drawn on earth. Thus he missed another opportunity to emulate and outdo Ramírez Hoffman]” (98, 97). We are thus forewarned that the pilot/poet will impersonate the horizon of Nazi literature, which, in turn, becomes an envoi of sorts, an “offering” to his prodding gaze. Schürholz, who idolizes death but is ultimately harmless in the sense that he has not physically hurt anybody, sets the stage for the multiple killer and artist of death Ramírez Hoffman.

The entry furthermore distinguishes itself from the rest of the book because it is told in the first person and because an expanded version of its storyline serves as the plot of *Distant Star* (1996, trans. 2004). Its narrator is a Chilean writer exiled in Catalonia named “Bolaño,” a straightforward alter ego of the author, who recounts what he knows of the life and work of Ramírez Hoffman. Abel Romero, a 60-some year old who was a distinguished policeman (read “detective”) under Allende’s government, entrusts him with a mission: to help him identify Ramírez Hoffman, who lives incognito in Europe, by recognizing his contributions in an array of literary magazines and ultimately by seeing him up close and confirming that he has the right man. The writer delivers and the policeman presumably kills the pilot-poet. As Latin American bounty hunters roam the world to hunt down their own in the Old continent, Ramírez’s extraterritorial execution is a fantastic and distorted inversion of the capture of Adolf Eichmann, the high-ranking Nazi in charge of the trains that carried millions to the extermination camps, who was captured by Mossad agents in Argentina in 1960 and later convicted and hanged in Israel.

Bolaño adds layers of meaning to this new, veiled anachronism by having the specter of Eichmann incarnate as a Chilean poet. The narrator recalls the pilot/torturer hosting a two-part soirée: first, he scribbled eerie, immense verses in the sky with his airplane, such as “La muerte es amistad/ La muerte es Chile/ La muerte es responsabilidad/ La muerte es amor [Death is friendship/Death is Chile/Death is responsibility/Death is love” (184); then, as the reader learns indirectly from the reactions of those who attended the opening, he offered a semi-private showing of explicit pictures of his tortured victims. As Ina Jennerjahn has shown, Ramírez Hoffman’s imaginary performance and installation result from the double articulation of the glorification of death in Italian futurist *artista-aviatore* with “[un] entrelazar dos discursos contrarios, el de la vanguardia fascista con el discurso contestatario de la

neovanguardia chilena [an interweaving of two antagonist discourses, that of the fascist avant-gard and that of the anti-establishment Chilean neo-avant-garde]” (74). According to *Nazi Literature* then, not only politics, but aesthetics too, makes strange bedfellows.

Indeed, the first part of the poet-perpetrator’s work follows closely on the footsteps of Raúl Zurita (1951), a founding member of CADA (Colectivo Acciones de Arte). However, Zurita’s alluded-to aerial verses, written in the skies above New York City in 1982 (“mi dios es desengaño/mi dios es carroña/mi dios es paraíso/ mi dios es pampa [my god is disappointment/my god is carrion/my god is paradise/my god is pampa]”), professed radically different politics, namely resisting authoritarianism and defying censorship back home through an ephemeral, blown-by-the-wind action in the metropolis. Insiders can read between the lines of Bolaño’s prose a critique of CADA’s response to the social shock of coup d’état with artistic shock, as well as an attack against Zurita’s allegedly untimely messianism, the criticism being that, in time, both aspects would wind up reproducing certain artistic values, such as authoritarianism and rupture, that CADA members opposed in politics.⁷⁹ Leaving aside the intricacies of Bolaño’s (unfair) caricaturization of alternative models of artistic reflection on life in Chile under dictatorship, note that the power of provocation in the fable of Ramírez Hoffman lies in elements such as a juxtaposition of concerns from different historical and artistic contexts, a transhistorical syncretism of reactionary thought, and the exposure of the discrepancies between political and esthetic ideals.

⁷⁹ “[H]abría que preguntar si el *discurso de la crisis* no se habría movido constantemente al borde del gesto coqueto y pseudo-elitista de la distinción, recurriendo al arte como sucedáneo de un diálogo democrático y político-cultural ya no existente. Además, cabe cuestionar la visión notablemente reduccionista de formas de expresión culturales que al parecer es resultado también de la no consideración de la producción artística del exilio y el debate internacional al respecto” (Jennerjahn 77).

It may seem from the previous exegesis that Bolaño bluntly draws a parallel between a torturer at the services of a military dictatorship, a genocidal bureaucrat, futurist poets at the dawn of the Great War, and Chilean poets during post-dictatorship. However, the encyclopedia does not spell out its allusions, let alone the relationships among them. Accordingly, the present reading accepts the text's invitation to fill in some of its blanks, if admittedly the attributions laid out could, and perhaps are meant to, be disputed. The mediation of the character Bolaño in the final act of taking justice into one's own hands, apart from being a symptom of the decades-long frustration of not having Pinochet and his cohorts properly brought to justice, inscribes the book itself into the ugly entanglement of literature and politics that the encyclopedia has sought to expose (See "feo asunto" 199). It adds to the cause of provocation that this entanglement should level major political events in the 20th century with petty politics, such as Bolaño's fray with CADA.⁸⁰ More importantly, however, this aggravation contributes to actualizing, for a potentially global readership, crucial polemics about the relations between art and politics which better serve their purpose by being lively subjects of debate and not just distant subjects of study.

Among such actualized debates, the book notably takes up the critical discussion around post-Second World War poetry. To Adorno's argument on whether there could be poetry after Auschwitz, Bolaño's characters answer provocatively that poetry *begins* with Auschwitz. *Nazi Literature* invites reactions from the reader along the lines of "can a torturer be a poet?" only to denounce candor and reply: "of course!" Torturers can be poets as they can be cooks, or brush their teeth in the morning. That a torturer should therefore be "more human" only amounts to make him more of a

⁸⁰ Bolaño's parabolizes this dispute in his chronicle of a dinner party he allegedly attended at Diamela Eltit and Jorge Arrate's house in "El pasillo sin salida aparente" (2004: 71-78).

monster. One could then see Bolaño's characters as fictional and perverse counterarguments to the claim, often attributed to Adorno, that it is not possible to write poetry, or by extension to make art, after the extermination camps. As Klaus Hofmann has shown, however, this claim results from a misunderstanding of Adorno's aporetic method (182). Such a method is in fact in tune with Bolaño, who carries out a narrativized continuation, in a different register, of Adorno's dialectics of culture and barbarism –call it the dialectics of global culture and the residues of barbarism.

Bolaño follows a crucial idea behind Adorno's reflection, Benjamin's reflection that every document of civilization is also a document of barbarism (256). Such an idea affects the form of philosophical thought, and in the Chilean author's case, the language and scope of fiction. In different ways, for both Frankfurt school thinkers recognizing that in thought too one may find the seed of barbarism leads to assuming negativity as methodological tool. Explanations cut short and argumentative nooks are parts of a practice that must resist easy assimilation and mistrust the "clarity" of enlightened optimism, since this path may lead not only to an uncritical position, but potentially to abusive politics. In Bolaño, the recognition that literature can be an agent of fascism leads to indefiniteness: whereas the title of the book indicates that somehow all entries belong to a common system or province of the imagination, this remains one of blurry edges. Instead of clear-cut us vs. them dichotomies or precise definitions of Nazism, Bolaño seeks to involve the reader as a perpetrator. Hence, the book finalizes with an "epilogue for monsters," which consists of a long list of book titles by, and ultra-minimal biographies about, the broader kin of Nazi writers in the Americas.

Benjamin saw as part of the task of the critical historian to put moments in the past that hold the promise of emancipation in relation to each other, such as the Parisian revolts of 1830 and 1848, along with the Commune of 1870. Whereas such a

constellation counteracts a positivist and linear view of history, Bolaño proposes a constellar model of literary historiography and a view of history that, far from being positivist, is skeptical in regards to the emancipatory possibilities of literature. When left to its own means, it appears literature can serve any political purposes: in a collection of more or less verisimilar reactionary lives and works, Bolaño acts as the invisible encyclopedist who provocatively assembles characters who see themselves as “insurgent Nazi writers” awaiting some sort of negative emancipation. Thus, if the Chilean author’s imaginary reactionary constellation can have an awakening effect analogous to Benjamin’s critical historical constellation, it does so through a negation of a negation. Benjamin’s method gave prominence to events that were at the margins of sanctioned history, while Bolaño populates the margins of literary history with an imaginary conspiracy. By way of further elucidation, consider then that the basic recurrent ideological structure of Bolaño’s book lies in the unstated claim that there is a specter haunting literature, and that, parodying the famous opening line of the *Communist Manifesto*, that is the specter of fascism.

Such a high-flown joke does not itself amount to a reactionary gesture because it contributes to presenting a *bizarro* image of globalization. With a characteristic articulation of traditional erudition and pop culture referents, Bolaño assimilates the notion of *bizarro* from the comic *Superman*. It belongs to a different study to explore whether the author actually recurred to the comic in his creative process; regardless, considering this possibility will allow us to understand a crucial aspect of *Nazi Literature*’s “mundo al revés.” Created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, teenagers from Cleveland whose parents were European-Jewish émigrés, Superman often responded to Nazism, and to the Nazi image world in particular, with colorful artworks where the Man of Steel, an idealized representation of U.S. values and agro-industrial power, vanquished the German enemy and, incidentally, its visual

representation of heroism [Fig. 19]. After the war was over and, concomitantly, the foe versus friend dichotomy became less apparent, different antagonists had to appear in the series. Since a suitable challenge to the hero's unparalleled prowess is no other than himself, along came *Bizarro*, who, puzzlingly, is in everything identical to Superman, means well, but does evil [Fig. 20]. Superman eventually solves the puzzle, finding that Bizarro thinks "in reverse," so, although wanting to help earth, he could eventually destroy it.

It is not difficult to see how this storyline represents ideological difference. For our present purposes, it is interesting to note how, unlike most other monsters in comics, or for that matter in literature more broadly understood, Bolaño's characters follow a similar pattern to that of Bizarro, who is visually and otherwise almost identical to the hero: they too "think in reverse." Such reverse thinking is at the heart of Bolaño's cultural critique of globalization and the many other topics that fall within the encyclopedia's broad scope. The stance is epitomized by Luis Fontaine, a character who does not advocate burning books, as a more consistent fascist would do; instead, he writes several hundred-page, encyclopedic treatises to refute encyclopedists Diderot and D'Alembert (in two separate volumes), as well as the illuminists Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau (225). Not coincidentally, he is grouped under the heading of "antiilustrado," a playful concept that heterodoxically combines bizarro logic with Adorno and Horkheimer's condemnation of Nazism as a perversion of Enlightenment. Similarly, the book mentions a "División Azul" of international volunteers who travel to Europe to join the cause of fascism, a bizarro image of the International Brigades that fought for the Spanish Republic. Analogously, transposing the operation to the role of sexual orientation in the self-fashioning of literary movements, it presents an imaginary homophobic Beat poet named "Jim O'Bannon."

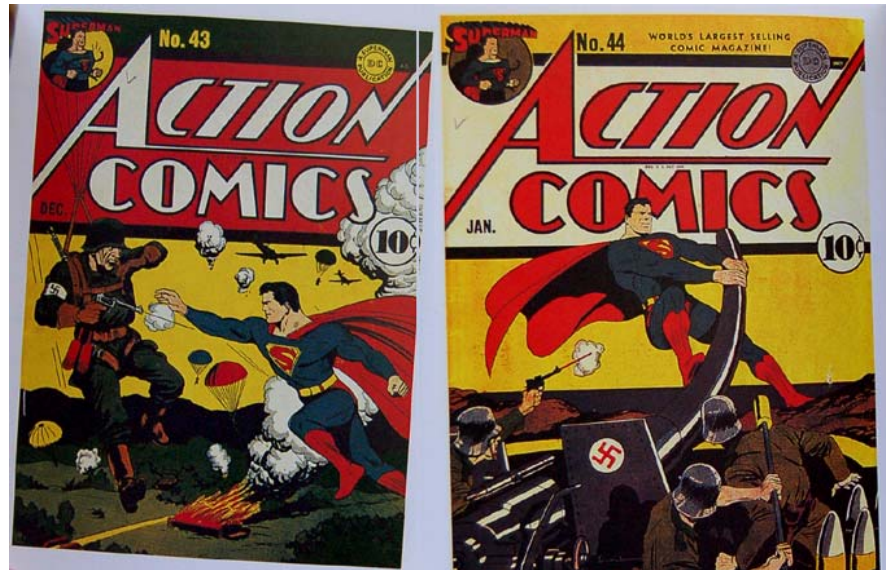


Figure 19: Superman versus the Nazis. Action Comics December 1941, 3; January 1942, 44. Cover artist Fred Ray.



Figure 20: Superman versus Bizarro. Superman May 1964, 169; Action Comics April 1960, 263. Cover artists: Curt Swan, Stan Kaye.

With its tentacular ambitions, *Nazi Literature* gives the impression of bursting at its seams. Beyond Nazism, Pinochetism, and other topics discussed thus far, racism and *criollismo* are also subject to bizarro inversions. Max Mirebalais, “el Pessoa bizarro del Caribe [the Caribbean’s bizarre answer to Pessoa],”⁸¹ is a Haitian poet and a plagiarist who, like the Portuguese poet, goes under many pseudonyms; he also happens to be enthralled by being a Nazi poet and not renouncing “cierto tipo de negritud [a certain kind of *négritude*]” (127, 130). Mirebalais exemplifies a certain “racism in reverse” that is pervasive throughout the book, which insinuates that movements such as *criollismo* or *Négritude* are some sort of lesser evils not unrelated to the openly racist ideals of Nazism. Indeed, ethnicity is always hybrid, for racial “purity” would only be possible in asexual reproduction. In this sense, the (literary) vindication of the criollo is a form of racism to the extent that it may privilege not a “pure race,” but an essentialized mixture, and something similar occurs with *Négritude*, who Sartre once described as “racisme anti-raciste” (xiv). However, in a given moment of time, as in the wake of the Latin American wars of independence from Spain, *criollismo* is a legitimate force that counteracts the hegemonic violence of State racism, as, *mutatis mutandis*, *Négritude* proposed an alternative to white European ascendancy in art. Bolaño suspends such historical specificity and stages a space for confrontation where the evocation of Nazism calls for re-thinking *criollismo*, *Négritude*, and the relation between racial ideas and literary creation in general. For Bolaño, fanatical *criollismo* and Nazi Aryanism are both absurd ideas that deconstruct each other. Hence, Max Mirebalais proposes that the Arian and Masai races share “un común destino en lo universal [a common destiny in the universal realm]” (133, 131) and the hooliganesque Argentine soccer fan Italo Schiaffino writes a poem described as “una criollada a la Von Clausewitz para despertar a los espíritus más inquietos de la

⁸¹ As we shall see, the translator’s decision is an unfortunate one.

patria [a kind of Latin American version of von Clausewitz, a wake-up call for the nation's inquiring minds]" (160, 158).⁸²

In this way, from the binary opposition of bizarro logic, the book moves toward a rhizome marked by bizarro tensions that cut across temporalities, as well as across linguistic and national traditions. Mirebalais evokes Pessoa, but also Césaire and Glissant. Arts patron Edelmira Thompson de Mendiluce publishes a chapbook as a young poet called "*Fervor*," an allusion to Borges's *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923); however, as a cultural promoter she alludes to Victoria Ocampo, and, most notably, to Mariquita Sánchez de Thompson (1786-1868), the hostess for the *tertulias* where the Argentine National Anthem was first sung and a founding figure for Argentine history and literature in her own right.⁸³ By invoking the latter, Bolaño makes resonate against each other, even at risk of losing their historical specificity, the theme of *civilización y barbarie*, as conceived in the young Latin American nations in the works of writers such as Sánchez de Thompson, and the opposition between civilization and barbarism as conceived in the debates about poetics after the Second World War. Such a somewhat arbitrary conjunction speaks to how the global challenges essentializing binary oppositions that pertain to a given historical configuration yet project themselves as universal. The author recurs to one framework to estrange the other, but in doing so, he alternatively exposes affinities and dissonance.

Beyond the figure of Bizarro, similar to a single distorted mirror-image, as it were, the book takes the reader to a hall of distorted mirrors, or rather to a "waterfall of

⁸² "Criollada" can be, given the context, a ruse or a folcloric musical composition. The translation does not convey the ambiguity in Bolaño, who implies that Von Clausewitz wrote *criolladas* or that one can fashion a *criollada* after him.

⁸³ Mariquita was known as "la del destino bizarro" (Mizraje 13). Although "bizarro" in Spanish means brave or generous, and not bizarre or angry (as in Italian *bizarro*), perhaps Bolaño used the *faux amis* as a prompt. In the last line of Edelmira's biography, he writes: "mantuvo la lucidez ('la rabia', decía ella) hasta el final" (23).

mirrors” in the terms of the imaginary poem “Cosmogonía del Nuevo Orden” by the Colombian volunteer in the Nazi army Jesús Fernández-Gómez:

El poema, de intención épica, narra dos historias que constantemente se intercalan y yuxtaponen: la de un guerrero germano que debe matar a un dragón y la de un estudiante americano que debe demostrar en un medio hostil su valía. El guerrero germano sueña una noche que ha matado al dragón y que sobre el reino que éste subyugaba se impondrá un nuevo orden. El estudiante americano sueña que debe matar a alguien, que obedece la orden que le ordena matar, que consigue un arma, que se introduce en la habitación de la víctima y que en ésta sólo encuentra una «cascada de espejos que lo ciegan para siempre». El guerrero germano, tras el sueño, se dirige confiado a la lucha en donde morirá. El estudiante americano, ciego, vagará hasta su muerte por las calles de una ciudad fría, reconfortado paradójicamente por el brillo que provocó su ceguera [The poem, of epic aspirations, it tells two stories, constantly juxtaposing them and jumping from one to the other: the story of a Germanic warrior who must slay a dragon, and the story of a South American student who must prove his worth in a hostile milieu. One night the Germanic warrior dreams that he has killed the dragon and that henceforth, in the kingdom it had long tyrannized, a new order shall prevail. The South American student dreams that he must kill someone, and in his dream obeys the order, obtains a gun, and enters the victim’s bedroom, in which he finds only ‘a cascade of mirrors, which blind him forever.’ The Germanic warrior, reassured by his dream, goes unsuspectingly to the battle in which he is to die. The South American student will spend the rest of his life wandering, blind, through the streets of a cold city, paradoxically comforted by the splendor that caused his blindness] (42-43, 37-38).

The nonsensical fable fittingly sums up the fatal attraction and the ultimate misencounter between the pen and the sword that emerges from the pages of *Nazi Literature*. The sword in this case stands for a heterogeneous set of disputes that constitute a “cosmogony of a New Order” if under “order” one may also conceive of “chaos,” and if the question of *whose* order or *whose* chaos, along with that of what is literature to do in regards to such problems, are part of an ongoing polemic. As “epic intent” is but elusive, the sum of the overdetermined bizzarro tensions of the encyclopedia ultimately tells the story of an unheroic global interconnectedness

whereby reactionary thought also determines cultural translation. Canon formation, the secularized heroic tale the book addresses most persistently, if obliquely, appears thus embedded into a broader set of cultural negotiations that participate themselves in historical contradiction.

The likes of Schürholz, Ramírez Hoffman, or Fernández-Gómez inhabit a parallel world governed by erratic rules which, by contrast, unmask existing “rules.” In this sense, one of the truly salient aspects of Bolaño’s book, and of Latin American literature’s take on Nazism in general, is reverting the flow of cultural production about Nazism, thus making a dynamics visible by transforming it. Indeed, Bolaño’s gesture of inscription in the global happens against the grain of various cultural flows. At first glance, this amounts but to a playful impertinence, yet upon further consideration one may appreciate how it allows *Nazi Literature* to imagine a certain “globalization in a hall of mirrors”: a multifocal (literary) historicity that challenges received ideas about centrality and periphery. The gesture is less about Latin American authors laying claim to the artistic legacy of the Second World War, from which the continent was largely spared, if not from its aftermath, but to use this unlikely position as a pivot for cultural criticism in the present.

Of course, cultural flows pertaining Nazism were not nearly as decisive at a global level during the 1990s as economic flows were. It is not a coincidence then that while neoliberalism was taking over the world stage, the book should imagine a parallel reality where a global fascist conspiracy threatens to do just that. Consequently, although it omits the Chilean author, some of the conclusions of Francine Masiello’s book-length essay *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis* (2001), which studies Latin American representations of and against neoliberalism, apply to Bolaño. A work like *Nazi Literature* partakes in various significant traits of what the critic calls the “art of transition” from the years between

dictatorship and market reform in the Southern Cone, such as responding with a deep experience of history to the neoliberal dismissal of history as a whole.⁸⁴

On the other hand, Bolaño marks a return to a more traditional kind of writing—in regards to the mainstream Latin American canon represented by Boom authors—than that of the (neo)avant-garde writers that *The Art of Transition* has in mind, such as CADA-member Diamela Eltit, a novelist, as well as a performance and video artist, whose books, formally similar to the *nouveau roman*, have been described as a “succession of ideologically constituted hieroglyphs which, in a very particular place and time, define access to the language of dreaming” (Januzzi 159). Perhaps Eltit and Bolaño have more in common than meets the eye, although it could also be the case that, against Masiello’s argument, traits such as the resistance to neoliberalism and a heightened awareness of race, gender, and sexual orientation are not paired with certain literary practices. A third possibility is that Bolaño appears in a post-neo-avant-garde moment, further removed from the experience of dictatorship where such elements may appear as: tragicomedy, additional critical distance, new negotiations between global and local realms, alternative takes on the relations between tradition and rupture. Be this as it may, consider *Nazi Literature*’s open-ended totality under the light of Masiello’s indictment of the totalizing narrative of neoliberal globalization:

While neoliberalism attempts to render complete and totalizing narratives about culture under globalization, covering the unevenness of our different stories with a homogenizing gloss, avant-garde art and literature work from a contrary assumption, often revealing those sites of suture where fragments are weakly united, uncovering the point where art, on the verge of collapse, “magically” becomes whole through the intervention of spectators or readers engaged with narrative process. (181)

⁸⁴ “If neoliberalism, as a celebration of free-marketeering, paints a sheen of apparent neutrality on social contradiction, erasing strands of memory that bound individuals to their past and suppressing discussion of “value,” literature and art instead cultivate tension, revealing the conflicts between an unresolved past and present” (3).

Bolaño emphasizes less sites of suture than surfaces for reflection, less the active moment of rupture than the slow effect of a continuity in which he participates self-critically. *Nazi Literature* denounces the endurance and many semblances of reactionary thought, and laughs at its face –even when such a face may appear all too familiar in the nook of a distant mirror.

The Extended Family of the Mendiluce

Whereas *In Search of Klingsor* and *Amphitryon* take many of their cues from *Nazi Literature*, they diverge significantly from it. The difference that most immediately comes to mind is their more insistent depiction of all things Nazi: regalia, military ranks, places, and proper names. Both novels follow the conventions of Hollywood's imagery of Nazism, a debt insinuated by Padilla when he names one of his characters "Bogart," presumably after the actor's famous role in *Casablanca* (1942). *Amphitryon*'s Bogart changes sides in regards to his cinematic homonym, turning out to be Nazi. Cinema itself changes sides in Volpi, whose novel opens with a disquieting description of a wolfish Hitler who, sitting in a private cinema in his bunker while bombs fall on Berlin, cheers to gory images of the executions of those who had plotted against his life the year before: "¡Bravo! –aúlla de nuevo, como si una cámara fuese a inmortalizar sus encías y sus dientes cariados" (12).⁸⁵ Such evocations and diversions of the cinematic medium indicate self-awareness about the novels' place within a third hand, pop-culture mediated rendering of Nazism.

⁸⁵ The translation published under Kristina Cordero's name differs so much from the original that one assumes the author rewrote extensive passages before submitting the book to his American publisher. Hitler's private movie show appears, in an abridged, toned-down version, toward the end: "'Bravo!' he cries again, as the projectionist turns on the lights, hoping that the session has helped lift the Führer's intense melancholy" (351).

Like the last entry of *Nazi Literature* and its denouement in *Distant Star*, both novels are quests to find a criminal. *In Search of Klingsor* recounts the efforts of Francis Bacon, a young scientist enlisted in the U.S. Army, as he travels through Germany after the Second World War to find the mastermind behind Hitler's program for assembling an atomic bomb. Bacon finds the code-name "Klingsor" as a loose thread in the transcripts of the Nuremberg trials and carries out extensive interviews with important scientists of the stature of Einstein or Bohr in order to make sense of the name. The interviews are occasion for Volpi to deploy a thinly veiled essayistic prose that ponders the nature of evil and the possible relations between everyday life and scientific theories such as Heisenberg's uncertainty principle or Gödel's incompleteness theorems. Along four hundred pages of thoroughly researched historical speculations, moral disquisition, and scientific divulgation, the thriller presents the reader with a series of plot twists in which Klingsor appears not as a man but as an entity, or after all, as the fantasy of a mad man in a mental asylum.⁸⁶

Much of the critical discussion surrounding the novel has focused on interpreting the fact that, while the author is Mexican, the subject matter of his work is not. Two dominant positions arise from this discussion, one that criticizes Volpi for allegedly turning his back on his reality and tradition, and another that, on the contrary, celebrates his cosmopolitan thrust to unlink literary works from their place of origin (See López de Abiada, Jiménez Ramírez, and López Bernasocchi). A radical version of the second position sees in Volpi a Calibanesque triumph of the periphery over the center. Thus, after documenting how the initial reception of the novel in the German-speaking world was predominantly celebratory –with the notable exception of Georg Pichler, who laments Volpi's "indifference vis-à-vis the victims of the Nazi State"–

⁸⁶ Ilan Stavans observes that in the end the plot becomes "improbable," making "the whole construct collapse" (678).

Abiada and Leuenberg suggest that the novel is politically engaged in a struggle against Eurocentrism (368).

However, there appears to be little particularly anti-Eurocentric in mastering a realist semblance of life in post-War Germany from the distant shores of contemporary Latin America. On the other hand, neither does acknowledging the book's fascination for those times and place expose the zeal of a new kind of perverse Eurocentrism. One should instead take a step back and appreciate how the very debate is ill-founded: the subject matter of the work *is* Mexican insofar as the legacies of the Second World War are part of an increasingly global cultural heritage which, for good and for worse, includes the mediation of Hollywood films. Many a German novelist of Volpi's generation who were to write about the Reich's scientists would resort to the same secondary sources mentioned in the "Nota final [End Note]," which does not amount to saying that the author's nationality is negligible, as legacies weigh unevenly. Nationality matters for many reasons, not the least of which is that the better chances at canonization for *Klingsor* lay first in being a Mexican novel to deal with such a topic, second in being a Latin American novel doing so, and only then in the insights it offers on the topic itself.

As in *Nazi Literature*, *Klingsor* contributes less to an understanding of the Second World War, with the obvious exception of the role of scientists therein, than to the inscription of Latin American literature in the global. The debates surrounding *Klingsor* illustrate many of the tensions that arise when Latin American authors seek to position themselves beyond the realm of the national or the regional. The views of Volpi as Caliban and as an *apátrida* [unpatriotic person] both hold their share of truth, if not in the terms they are most commonly framed. First, the author is not usurping the language of the master but showing that the language is not, and has not been for a long time, the master's: the (cinematic) conventions of spy narratives set during the

Reich or during its aftermath are up for grabs. Secondly, *Klingsor* is not leaving a Mexican horizon by leaping onto a world stage, although, by assuming the convention all but too whole-heartedly, it turns away from conveying the resonance between the local and the global that Bolaño's work does. In other words, whereas *Nazi Literature* as a free-standing narrative invites the reader to reflect about the effects of art and historical discourse across borders, *Klingsor* does so primordially through the debates it has generated.

In this sense, *Amphitryon* has more in common with Volpi than with Bolaño. The novel is rich in historical detail, although historical dispute itself is narrowly conceived as the sum of racy chess matches among worthy opponents. The novel follows a mysterious character whose stunning personal transformations and the pains he takes in assuming another person's name and identity constitute the dominant recurrent theme and the main device for the plot's intrigue. The first of several identity swaps occurs when Austro-Hungarian private Thadeus Dreyer, who travels on a train that is to take him to the front during the Great War, bets his destiny over a chessboard against Victor Kretzschmar, who is on his way to a safe post as a switchman. If Volpi uses a layman's understanding of Gödel's theorem (the idea that something, in this case *Klingsor*'s existence, is undecidable, that is, both true and impossible to prove) as the overarching structural principle for his plot, Padilla uses the job of a switchman and the game of chess as his. Thus, the lives of his characters are such that one can fill in "the tracks" of another, or in other words assume his destiny. Along the way they remain under the threat of being fatally "derailed" by an invisible agent that alternatively hints at fate, a divine force, or the author. In terms of the comparison with chess, all characters are but pawns in a match that ultimately convenes the author and the reader, an image that ciphers the book's vocation: to be an intelligent and entertaining game.

As amenable storytelling and intrigue for intrigue's sake occupy in Volpi and Padilla a more central role than in Bolaño, so do moral readings of history. Evil is not an absent center as in *Nazi Literature*, but a ruling force that makes itself be felt throughout. The very name “Dreyer” denotes a certain evil that is passed on, like a torch, among different individuals who at one point bear the name. Thus, the would-be switchman loses the initial match, becomes Dreyer, and ultimately dies by his own hand to comply with the terms of a bet against a young seminarist who sought to expose his opponent's false identity, and who, burdened by guilt upon his death, decides to assume that identity. The new Dreyer rises through military ranks and ends up being an important general in Hitler's army. Other twists unfold, loosely inspired in historical cases of double espionage and assumed names, until the puzzle involves the identity of none other than the “master switchman” Adolf Eichmann, who in real-life happened to be a chess player. Dreyer's heirs, entrusted with a chess manual in Polish holding a code that explains a secret plan to replace key figures in the Nazi regime with doubles, suspect that the Eichmann who is being judged in Jerusalem is not the real Eichmann: “quizá aún estemos a tiempo para salvar de la horca a un hombre inocente [perhaps we're still in time to save an innocent man from the gallows]” (187, 163).⁸⁷

This is the point where the novel becomes both more problematic as a representation of Nazism and more interesting as a token of the place of contemporary Latin American literature within the global. Padilla's Eichmann is no less a caricature of a historical figure than the ones Bolaño so frequently uses; however, as Padilla's recourse to lighthearted detective fiction is unironical, so is his characterization of Eichmann. Given the novel's narrative economy, the man who personally oversaw the extermination of millions of people could be just any other person under the influence

⁸⁷ I cite Peter Bush and Anne McLean's translation.

of the name “Dreyer,” or in other words, possessed by wickedness. Despite the complex storyline, the course of history itself is thus reduced to the millenary battle of good versus evil, an idea reinforced by the mythic overtones of the title.⁸⁸ Padilla, who mentions Hannah Arendt’s “ya legendario [now legendary]” *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in the novel’s colophon, seems to proceed from a reading of Arendt’s concept of the “banality of evil” which renders “banality” in a literal yet mystified sense (208). Arendt clarifies the concept in the postscript to her well-known report and philosophical study of Eichmann’s trial:

[W]hen I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial. Eichmann was not Iago or Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III ‘to prove a villain.’ (...) He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*. (...) And if this is “banal” and even funny, if with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann, that is still far from calling it commonplace (288).

Indeed, *Amphitryon* both gives “demonic profundity” to Eichmann *and* posits his deeds, if not as commonplace, then as the result of an inscrutable fate that could turn any honorable chess player into an arm chair murderer. On the other hand, Padilla offers an interesting reflection about the force of the name “Eichmann” upon the present, where it is less of a proper name than a world-wide recognized site for infamy: “el nombre de Adolf Eichmann ha comenzado a invocarse en todas partes con rencor y desprecio [Adolf Eichmann's name has been mentioned everywhere with loathing and contempt]” (133, 112).⁸⁹ Thus, leaving aside the exploration of the limits of personal identity and individual responsibility undertaken by the novel, note how

⁸⁸ In Greek mythology, Zeus assumed the shape of Amphitryon in order to lay with the latter’s wife, who was unable to distinguish her husband from the god. A similar mythic reference underwrites Volpi’s novel, as “Klingsor” is a character in Wagner’s *Parsifal* (Lottaz 208).

⁸⁹ See Healy for a different kind of transposition of the name, consider Ward Churchill’s hotly debated remarks about the victims of 9/11 attacks being “little Eichmanns.”

Amphitryon taps into the interpellative power of names and images that circulate globally and incorporates them into its narrative. Whereas it is problematic that it should situate itself at an all but equal distance from Bogart as from Eichmann, the novel is noteworthy not only as an example of Latin American literature's drive to reach beyond the national, but also insofar as it participates in the transmission and transformation of global cultural referents.

Despite their differences, reading *Nazi Literature* side by side with the novels by Volpi and Padilla allows us to draw several conclusions about the invocation of a cinematographically and otherwise pop-culture mediated "Nazism" in contemporary Latin American literature. Such a gesture speaks to, borrowing Andreas Huyssen's words, the "effects of the Nazi image-world upon the present" which arguably include attraction-repulsion, taboo, awe. ("Figures of Memory") Taken as a whole, "Nazi literature" from Latin America takes advantage of such effects to imagine a different present, challenging dominant narratives of globalization and their assumptions about centrality, periphery, and the directionality of cultural exchange.

The works studied here show a different facet of what Castells describes as a virtually worldwide "flow society" determined by global networks that carry information (1996). On the one hand, they illustrate Castells's observations about how such flows are asymmetric expressions of power relationships that may escape the logic of their controllers. On the other, they forewarn against the tendency to conceive of the "power of flows" only within the realm of information conceived in a narrow sense. The path to a global historical consciousness may pass through images of Bogart and Rains walking into the fog, but it does not stay there. The creative tension found between historical referents, pop culture images, and local concerns calls for going past the reductionism of thinking about globalization in terms of platitudes such as how "we are all (even more) connected." Connections are as much about form as

they are about content, as globalization involves actual people with historical baggage who filter the experiences from other coordinates of the world through the ones they are most directly involved in. Moreover, after Bolaño's exploration of the reactionary, one may appreciate how the very metaphor of "flow" also has its limits, as it takes out of the picture the many "frictions" of the present. In terms of the metaphor, the "medium" can also be viscous.

Nazi tales from Latin America at the turn of the 21st century constitute what Fredric Jameson would call "a space of production for the very problematic of globalization" (xvi). Bolaño's semi-fantastic encyclopedia performs this task from the book covers of its different language editions [Fig. 21]. Upon its original publication in Spain, the book written by a then mid-list Latin American author misled many a reader into thinking that its bibliographic entries alluded to actual people, and indeed anybody who would unpreparedly grab a copy of the book and did not know the author might spend some time figuring out what is going on. Certainly, this was part of *Nazi Literature*'s attack on the ivory tower of literature, which uses genre to circumvent the discussion about the autonomy of some but not other literary forms. After the initial publication, and especially after the author's death and canonization, numerous blurbs have domesticated the book, which has since been set squarely within the bookshelves: from the early days when one could find in bookstores *Nazi Literature* provocatively close to studies on Nazism, today one will find it next to García Márquez.

Apart from the many stories of travel that figure in the pages of *Nazi Literature*, its circulation as a book has its own story of global resonance and dissonance to tell. In the German-speaking world, where the gimmick of passing one's imaginary encyclopedia of Nazi literature as a reference work would be deemed insensible, the book circulates as *Naziliteratur in Amerika* with the cautionary subtitle *Roman*, that is,

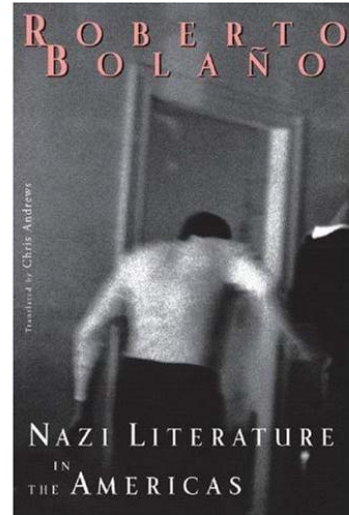
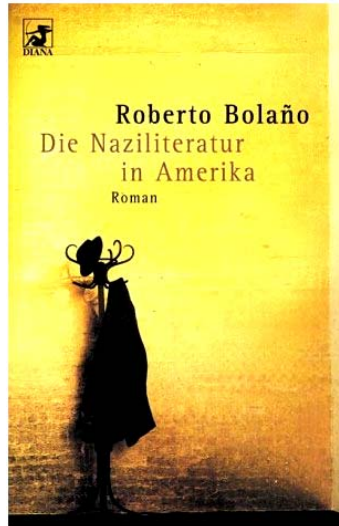


Figure 21: *Die Naziliteratur in Amerika*. München: Heyne, 2002; *Nazi Literature in the Americas*. New York: New Directions, 2008; *La literatura nazi en América*. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1996.

“A Novel” –which it is not, unless Borges’s *A Universal History of Infamy* were one too– although at the same time the portmanteau “Naziliteratur” gives a sense of accomplishment to the perverse genre that the Spanish title posits more tentatively. In turn, the plural “The Americas” in the English title speaks more of the literature of a mass of land than that of a polity, an impression that Bolaño’s bizarro Beatniks must offset in the inner pages of the book, where a different kind of continuum between North and South becomes patent.⁹⁰

It is soon to say whether an expanded critical reception of Bolaño will itself follow a unidirectional model of cultural exchange where, to put the matter bluntly, Latin America produces fiction and the First World produces analysis. *Nazi Literature* itself anticipates a model which is more like a two way bridge where, for instance, despite the obvious asymmetry, the critical discourse generated around Chilean art under dictatorship could to some extent bear upon contemporary discussions about art after Nazism. Furthermore, with their suggestive if less frequent incursions beyond the Latin American and Western European traditions, the works of Bolaño, Volpi, and Padilla make way for an even broader horizon.

⁹⁰ For a reflection on the politics and etymology of referring to the continent as *América* and to the U.S. as America, see Mignolo. One of the tasks of de-nazification was to remove Nazi titles from German public libraries, where anti-semitic children books were a common sight (Schoeps).

CONCLUSIONS

In 2007, Doris Salcedo (Bogotá 1958) intervened in the space of the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern of London with an installation/sculpture called “Shibboleth.” A summary consideration of this work, which shows interesting affinities with the gesturing towards the global characterized here, will allow us to make a final reflection and present the conclusions of this study.

Salcedo received what is perhaps the most prestigious commission in the art world, a *carte blanche* to use the space where, in the museum’s previous avatar as a power plant, one would find enormous electric generators. From before its inception, the artwork was conditioned in many ways. Tate Modern is a high church of contemporary art housed in a relic of industrial London. It faces St. Paul’s cathedral, which rivals it in size and sits across a bridge at the opposite bank of the Thames. The occasion was openly corporate-sponsored –part of the “Unilever Series”– and was surrounded with media hype and critical expectation. Salcedo, whose work has frequently dealt in non-figurative ways with the violence in Colombia, was the first Latin American artist in the series, which opened in 2000 with Louise Bourgeois and has since summoned the biggest names around, among them Anish Kapoor, Olafur Eliasson, Bruce Nauman, and Rachel Whiteread. In sum, Salcedo faced a unique combination of artistic autonomy within rigid cultural coordinates, and her response revolved around gesture.

“Shibboleth” was a giant, harrowing crack in the floor. Barely perceptible upon entering the gallery space, it gradually widened as it snaked along the room for 548 feet (167 meters). (*Tate Modern*) A few inches wide and around two feet deep, it resembled an abyss or an earthquake fissure, inviting contemplation and communicating a sensation of vulnerability. [Fig. 22] Media picked up stories of a few

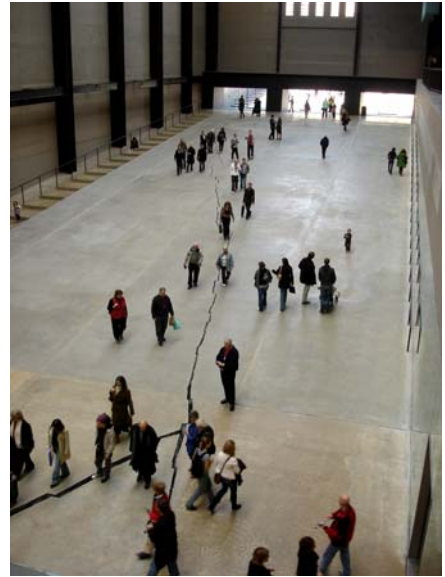


Figure 22: Shibboleth. 2007 Tate Modern, London. 2 May 2008.

<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/c/cf/Shibboleth_Tate_Modern.jpg>;

<<http://a6.vox.com/6a00c225239a5e8fdb00e398b0edd60001-500pi>>



Figure 23: Untitled. 1995: White Cube, London. 12 May 2008.

<<http://www.whitecube.com/artists/salcedo/sculpturetwo/>>

spectators who, despite warnings, tripped and hurt themselves. In a publicized public interpretation of her own work, Salcedo readily offered a key to the puzzle, mentioning the biblical story that tells how the Gileadites would kill those who crossed the river Jordan if they were unable to pronounce the ‘sh’ sound in “shibboleth,” since that would prove that they spoke a different dialect and were, thus, enemies. Using this narrative as a springboard, the artist directed the reception of the piece towards broad contemporary issues, including war, xenophobia, and the experience of immigrants. Certainly, one can read the work along those lines and appreciate how Salcedo transformed the lived experience at the Turbine Hall into a renewed understanding of such issues, calling to question the Gileadites of today.

But there is more to the installation. Perhaps seeking to escape the familiar burden of particularism, in her declarations about the piece Salcedo mentioned “the situation in Colombia” only marginally, as if pointing at the abyss that threatens us all and not at the distant abyss –and here one may recall *Our Lady of the Assassins*– that makes our comfort all the more comfortable. Had the artist let go of her life-long engagement with the country’s problematics at the peak of her international recognition? In fact, her work responded in one deft movement both to global and to local concerns, creating a space where these *would not have to be one or the other*. At a formal level, this happened within the crack itself, which was made of concrete cast of a Colombian rock face. Likewise, when one considers the artist’s oeuvre as a whole, one will find in the use of concrete a recurrent element that has served elsewhere to transform household items into objects that assimilate the exterior and the interior, as in the cabinets and beds “filled with concrete” of the series “La Casa Viuda” –an assessment of the “weight” of national events over daily life in the country. [Fig. 23] Through this material logic, her work transforms the floor of the Turbine Hall into that of an overgrown Colombian household. At the same time,

Salcedo's reflection partakes in metropolitan theoretical debates, given how the name and theme of the installation allude to the eponymous essay by Jacques Derrida on Paul Celan's "The Meridian," a topic that should be taken up by a different study.⁹¹

"Shibboleth" is aware of its conditions of production and does institutional critique of the art world –like Aira's *novelitas* do too in regards to the literary establishment. The title evokes ironically the artist's admittance to a very small circle: she has pronounced the password correctly. Consequently, the work reflects on the experience of going from the periphery to the center, except it spatializes such a movement as a different metaphor, that of going from the bottom up. Salcedo's intervention was not, however, in-your-face, and neither was it self-indulgent (as arguably Eliasson's had been a few years back: he made a working artificial sun). "Shibboleth" avows yet underexploits its condition as immigrant art, bears the national plight and drags the spectator in, utters the password that makes the building –the institution– crumble.

Like the gestures we have found in various writers, a central feature of Salcedo's work is that of bringing about a new constellation in a blink. Although the artist's pedagogism can at times make the installation seem unidimensional, its richness lies in its power to, as it were, concentrate historical contradiction around a single object which, although immediately apprehensible, causes a lasting impression and elicits critical thought. This is just the kind of operation we have attempted to historicize for the case of contemporary Latin American writers. Salcedo confronts the workings of an existing public sphere and orchestrates its transformation; her creation does not leave the audience unchanged. One may trace this performative quality in phenomena like Bellatin's Paris impersonation or Volpi's Peking lecture, but also in their developments and precedents within their works of fiction. Likewise, the reader does not experience the global in the same way after having imagined the alternative

⁹¹ "Shibboleth For Paul Celan" (1984) in Derrida 2005.

totalities or parallel globalizations put forward by Vallejo's rendering of visual culture as religion or by Bolaño's elaborate, fantastic global Nazi conspiracy. In turn, Aira finds his strand of conceptualism in a different branch of a tree that has Duchamp at its trunk and Salcedo not all that far away –or rather, in a rhizome that binds them all together.

Although the authors studied deal with specific problematics inherent to their texts and circumstances, varying widely from post-dictatorship, to sicariato, to consumerism, they all share the common denominator of making art of their inscription in the global. Thus, understanding the production of the global in their works and finding their place within the global are not separate endeavors. In situating themselves in the world, contemporary Latin American writers are finding new forms of expression or reinventing others, questioning the limits of traditional literary media, raising important questions about how we conceive the global, and challenging literary institutions. On the latter, one may take into consideration Graciela Montaldo's critique of the paralyzing effects of a rigid understanding of "world literature," and her "suspicion" that what we call literature is often but "mere institutionalization of a practice" (Sánchez Prado 267). Could gesturing toward the global be the kind of disruptive element that Montaldo has in mind, something that defies classification and falls through the gaps of the tightly knit institutional grid? This question must remain open, given that this dissertation happens within an institutional frame too.⁹²

Visual elements play an important role in the works we have considered. Bellatin is the only author studied here who actually incorporates pictures in his works, as in the photographic documentation of the non-existing installation of *Hero Dogs*.

⁹² By way of metaphorical elucidation one may recall how, in terms of *Klingsor's* folk physics, the instrument of measurement, both unreliable and indispensable, changes the place of the particles it seeks to measure. In terms of a more familiar analogy that drops the potentially undesirable connotations of literary criticism as a "hard science," one may observe that there is an *effect* to the perplexing lapse it takes an unusual gesture to be absorbed again by language.

However, reflections on visuality provide literary themes and constitute a key to reading every text in this corpus. The iconic constitutes an essential dimension of texts like *El congreso de literatura*, where Aira imagines the literary canon after celebrity culture, or *Our Lady of the Assassins*, where Vallejo renders the act of watching television after that of contemplating a religious figure. In a different register, the operations of the comic as genre shed light onto a text like *Nazi Literature in the Americas* by Roberto Bolaño. Similarly, one cannot conceive of the found Latin American “literary Nazism” without supposing a general familiarity with a global repository of images from the Second World War. One can only presume that, given the fast pace of changes in visuality, in time these narratives will gain documental value as works of fiction that hold the imprint of present-day visual culture.

It is soon to know to what extent authors have succeeded in debunking the global fixation on a past image of Latin American literature. The iconic autochthonous great Latin American writer has a seat in the global imagination, and this is not likely to change any time soon. The question remains of whether more recent practices will continue to open up new spaces not only for “greatness” but for actual intellectual interaction. At a narrative level, we have seen how a common underlying strategy of global inscription is that of taking a distance from the Boom while picking up Borges (and leaving Neruda, the other great pre-Boom figure, completely out of consideration). Whereas the relations between Aira and Borges have been analyzed (Montaldo 1990), a future study that addressed the return to Borges more comprehensively could take into consideration the Borgesian motifs found, which are not only numerous but also vital to their host narratives. For the sake of illustration, one could even refer to these contemporary works by their Borgesian affiliation, thus: Vallejo’s *Our Lady of the Assassins* would be “Aleph in a Slum,” Bolaño would have written a “Universal History of Nazi Tlön,” Volpi a “Theme of the Scientist Traitor

and the Scientist Hero,” and Padilla a “Garden of Forking Railways.” Another related future critical task is that of working through the authorial tendency to misrepresent the Boom, which was, of course, more than just magical realism, while magical realism in turn was more than “just magical realism” too.⁹³ Beyond setting the record straight, it would be interesting to evaluate this misrepresentation as a cultural phenomenon.

We have studied gestures that situate contemporary Latin American fiction within a global framework. As we have seen, authors imagine the global against the grain of dominant narratives of cultural centrality and conceive globalization beyond abstract “interconnectedness.” If we are indeed connected, they seem to tell us, then cultural exchanges will have to be complex, multidirectional, and rich. Accordingly, an expansion of this dissertation will consider other models of exchange and evaluate them from the perspective of the gestural. Tentatively, these will include, on the one hand, narratives of migration, and on the other, cultural dialogues between Latin America, Africa, and Asia that take place with little or no mediation from Europe or the U.S.

The model put forward here could be useful for the study of other regional literatures as well. It would be interesting to consider strategies for global inscription across different traditions and to evaluate how they situate themselves, for instance, in regards to the dilemma of particularism versus universalism. A broader comparative analysis of internationally emerging authors would be another logical continuation to this argument, and recent publications could offer an initial platform to carry out such an investigation. We can refer briefly a few that involve authors mentioned here. Mario Bellatin shares the pages of *Words Without Borders* (2007) with authors from the five continents. The anthology, concerned with the fact that “50 percents of all the

⁹³ See Zamora, Parkinson, and Faris, Eds.

books in translation now published worldwide are translated *from* English, but only 6 percent are translated *into* English” (xi), features original translations of short texts by over twenty authors that, in addition to Bellatin, include Latin American authors Juan Villoro, Ambar Past, Horacio Castellanos Moya, Marcela Solá, Juan José Saer, and Juan Forn. Bellatin also participated in a similar initiative hosted by the journal “Meet” (2007) of the Maison des Écrivains Étrangers et des Traducteurs de Saint-Nazaire, which assembled in the special number “Mexico et Sarajevo” texts by authors from both cities in their original languages and in French translation. The issue also included Paco Ignacio Taibo II, Carlos Monsiváis, Sergio Pitol, and Natalia Toledo, among other Mexican writers; the journal has had similar numbers on Trieste and Buenos Aires, San Salvador and Tbilissi, Berlin and Caracas, and so forth.⁹⁴ Arguably, such initiatives avoid the pitfalls of operating like “the forum of a ‘literary world cup’,” as Benedict Anderson described Casanova’s “World Republic of Letters” (qtd. in English 312).

Doris Salcedo’s intervention in the Turbine Hall reminds us that globalization is not written on the stars. The world is not *one* place; there is no *telos* that naturally leads to the consciousness of the world as a whole, and neither is there a path that naturally takes to the constitution of a “world literature” that harmonizes the global and the local. One can always stop and hear the dissonance. After all, perhaps “shibboleth” is a word best pronounced with a heavy accent.

⁹⁴ Similarly, the British Council and 98.5 U.N. Radio, the radio station of the National University of Colombia, host a bilingual radio emission broadcast in London and in Bogotá that features oral narratives from both cities (2007-2008). See U.N. Radio “Vasos comunicantes.”

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